

9

VALKYRIE
HAS LANDED

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV



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NEW YORK

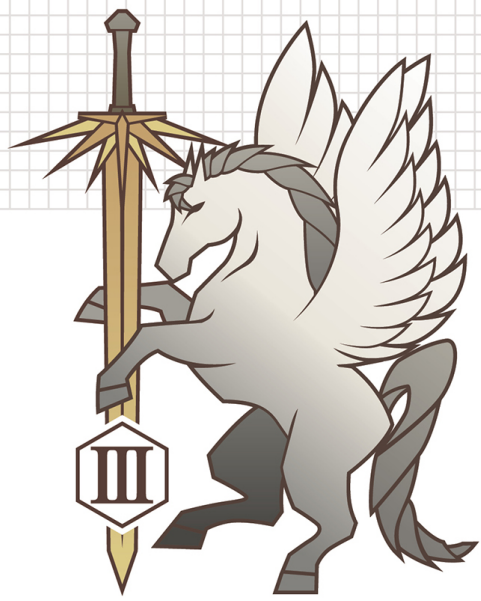


[TITLE]

KEYWORD INTRODUCTIONS

The song from the sea
drives their souls mad.

[design]
BELL'S GRAPHICS



※ The insignia of Shiga Toura

Theocracy Military, 3rd Armored Division, Shiga Toura

One of the major branches of the Theocracy army. Their primary Feldreß is the armored type 5 Fah-Maras, as well as its consort drone unit, the Lyano-Shu. A girl even younger than Lena, Himmelnåde Rêze, serves as its commander and the second holy general of the entire army. Under her guidance, the 3rd Armored Division partake in arduous combat against the Legion.

The Holy Theocracy of Noiryanaruse

One of the few countries that have been confirmed to survive the Legion War. Located west of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, on the tip of the continent. Though many of its surrounding countries were consumed by the war, the Theocracy continues to resist the Legion's invasion.

The national religion is the Noirya faith, and its precepts are followed strictly, holding even more importance than the law. Their unusual national policy has made even Vika look down on them as a "mad country." Both the United Kingdom and the Federacy regard them with caution.

The Noctiluca's Current Position

During last volume's battle, the Noctiluca was positioned east of the United Kingdom in the Regicide Fleet Countries. It has since gone around the north of the United Kingdom and is presumed to have escaped to countries in the west of the continent. There is a possibility it possesses information regarding the transmission point that's capable of sending out a shutdown sequence to all the Legion.

The dreams of these girls, who stand upon the front lines...

[EIGHTY-
SIX]



Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.



ASATU ASATU PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION: SHIRABI

MECHANICAL DESIGN: I-IV

86

— Valkyrie Has Landed —

Volume
NINE



“I
love
you,
too.”

Until death did
they part?
No. They would
not wish for such
finite happiness.
The winds
of war, upon
which traveled
death itself,
were persistent
and spiteful and
would scatter so
weak a wish all
too easily.
No, not even
death could keep
them apart.

Life, love, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

9 VALKYRIE HAS LANDED

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION: Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN: I-IV

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

The song from the sea drives their souls mad.

A source of pride. A wish. A bond. A prayer. Or perhaps...a
curse.

—FREDERICA ROSENFORT,
RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BATTLEFIELD

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 9

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Shirabii

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

86—Eighty-Six—Ep. 9

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PROLOGUE

THE BEAST OF GLUTTONY

<<Plan Schwertwal to all blank sector garrison units.>>

Despite the size of the massive iron shadow, the sound it made as it crawled out of hiding resembled nothing more than the dull clack of bones scraping against one another. It stood at a staggering three hundred meters tall and was easily capable of knocking down entire buildings. Its radar mast pointed proudly at the heavens, its shape reminiscent of a dragon boat's hornlike figurehead.

With its many legs, it traversed the waves lapping at the shore and the jagged pebbles littering the sand, but the gaping hole in its flank left a blemish on its imposing majesty. Its two 800 mm turrets had their barrels blown off, and its two pairs of silver wings were scorched and tattered.

This was what humanity called the Electromagnetic Gunboat type, the Noctiluca—the Legion's amphibious assault ship.

With the unsteady gait of a wounded marine mammal, the massive vessel crept out of the waves and dragged itself onto the water's edge. The Legion had just experienced its first-ever true naval battle, and they challenged humanity's largest naval power, as weakened as that country may have been. The battle was intense, and the Noctiluca's body was now severely damaged.

It tottered unevenly over the land, leaving crooked footsteps in its wake, before its legs finally gave way, and it keeled over.

<<Landed on point 087. Further self-propulsion deemed impossible. Requesting assistance.>>

The machine's howls crossed the gray, hazy air. This land had been discarded and abandoned by humanity long before the Legion War. As such, the enemies of humanity—the Legion—had deployed some forces in very small numbers to this region as well.

And so the Noctiluca's appeal for assistance was relayed to the Admiral and Weisel units dotting the land.

<<Rescue signal from Plan Schwertwal received. Acknowledged. Deploying forces.>>

One unit answered its call. Like the Noctiluca, it was a prototype unit—an improved, developed form of the existing Legion forces. A model that would remain hidden here in the abandoned region, away from the eyes of humanity, until the day it would be rolled out to combat.

<<Plan Ferdinand to Plan Schwertwal. There is a query that is pending confirmation. — Requesting response.>>

Following that, a question reached it over the airwaves in the mechanical language of the Legion. It was a transmission that had been encrypted several times over—one that would never reach humanity. On the other side of that ashen curtain wavered a massive city-size shadow, large enough to dwarf even the three-hundred-meter-tall amphibious assault ship. And this shadow, too, stirred with the quiet, bone-like rustling unique to the Legion.

<<—Are you capable of integration?>>

Federal Republic of Glad Military
Eighty-Sixth Strike Package

Shin

A young man marked by the Republic of San Magnolia with the stigma of being a subhuman Eighty-Six. He possesses the ability to hear the "voices" of the Legion and is a pilot of remarkable skill who has survived countless battles. He is currently the operations commander for the newly formed Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.



Lena

A Handler who once fought alongside Shin and the Eighty-Six. She has been reunited with them following their death march into Legion territory cruelly disguised as a Special Reconnaissance mission and now serves as tactical commander for the Federacy, once again fighting side by side with them.



Frederica

An orphaned daughter of the old Empire of Glad, where the Legion were developed. She cooperated with Shin and the Eighty-Six for the sake of defeating Kiriya, her former knight and brotherly guardian, who was assimilated by the Legion. She currently serves as an assistant control aide for Lena in the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. Revealed to be the key to stopping the Legion War.



Raiden

A young man of the Eighty-Six who found shelter in the Federacy along with Shin. An escapee who turned to Shin. Raiden saves him from isolation when the haunting voices of the Legion weigh upon him.



Kurena

A young woman of the Eighty-Six and an escapee—she asked never to be heard of again, but will then ever be remembered.?



Theo

A young man of the Eighty-Six. A crossbreed cyborg with a cyber tongue. A former host at a sex-oriented bar...



Anju

A young woman of the Eighty-Six. She appears graceful, but shows a much more ruthless side during battle. She specializes in suppressing fire through the use of missiles.



Grethe

Headed control. She is the commanding officer for Shin and his group, and the unit commander for the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.



Annette

A friend of Lena's and head of research and development for the Peace-Rail system. She was childhood friends with Shin back when they both lived in the Republic's First Sector. She was dispatched with Lena to the Federacy and now often deals with Shin.



Shiden

One of the Eighty-Six, and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. She heads Lena's personal guard.



Shana

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who had spent an immense amount of time at the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. She had a calm and collected personality that both commanded and complemented Shiden's.



Rito

A young man of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. He was once a member of a squadron that belonged to...



Michihi

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. Like Rito, she is quiet and stoic.



Dustin

A student who gave a speech concerning the treatment of the Eighty-Six prior to the Republic's fall. He volunteered to join the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package after Republic citizens were harassed.



Marcel

A Federacy soldier who was originally a Federal Operative, but he is a paid bandit. He suffered a debilitating injury, which left him unable to pilot a Federacy. He has since transferred to the role of support personnel in Lena's command center.



Yuuto

A young man of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. Though he is a person of few words, he possesses exemplary command and piloting skills.



Olivia

A young man of the Eighty-Six with a distinctive appearance who has been dispatched by the Strike Package from the Alliance of Glad. He serves as a liaison for a non-regime system.



Vika

The first prince of the United Kingdom of First Grade. He is the overlord of the current generation—a unique figure with superhuman intelligence. These figures are direct products of the First Grade royal lineage. He developed the Kirya—human-shaped, continuous control units.



Lerche

The first of the Stride. She possesses the most amount of this advanced childhood friend.

EIGHTY-SIX

CHAPTER 1

THE MERMAID'S BARGAIN

Despite eventually failing in its task to conquer the largest leviathan nest, the Fleet Countries' supercarrier was built for expeditions spanning thousands of kilometers. As such, the ship had to be capable of supporting the needs of its thousands of crew members for voyages lasting as long as six months.

This, of course, included the necessities—food, water, clothing, and lodging. But among the facilities there was also a library, a chapel, a gym, and a canteen. An entire base's functions were loaded onto this hundred-thousand-tonne ship.

And of course, the ship also had its own onboard medical facility.

"I guess the fact that this was a joint operation with the Fleet Countries is the one silver lining here."

The damaged supercarrier's massive shadow stood in the nighttime port like a gigantic carcass. Dustin had spoken while tearing his gaze from its dark silhouette in the distance. He stood in the corridors of a military hospital that had been built upon a small hill overlooking the sea and the sprawling port town.

The members who'd been most severely injured during the Mirage Spire operation had been transported and hospitalized here, though the process had only just finished. The others weren't allowed to visit them yet, and so they remained in the corridor. Those who came to comfort and pick up the wounded had to suppress their frustration at not being able to see them.

Yes, the wounded.

Such as the one who had forced the Noctiluca to retreat and lost his hand in the process—

"The Stella Maris had an operating room and an ICU, too. And the

medical examiners were able to treat him just in time, so—,” Dustin started to say.

“I know what you’re trying to say, Dustin. But shut up.” Raiden cut into his words.

His voice was nearing an animalistic growl. Dustin realized it already, but there wasn’t much meaning in trying to gloss over the situation at this point. The Stella Maris’s hospital wing was technologically advanced and well equipped; it had several operating rooms, an ICU, and hospitalization facilities.

With the Orphan Fleet often sailing far away from the mainland to challenge the leviathans, the prospect of returning injured crew members to the land on time wasn’t always a realistic one. The ship’s facilities were built to accommodate for that.

And indeed, Theo was sent to the operating room almost as soon as he was rescued, so despite the severe injury to the artery that extended from his heart to his left arm, he was treated before the situation became life-threatening.

However...

“It feels like...so *what*? He still lost his hand, y’know?” Raiden said with a sigh.

“...Sorry.” Dustin hung his head.

“He’ll...probably be discharged because of his injury, right?” Michihi muttered.

“Assuming he doesn’t specifically ask to be discharged, they’ll likely just reassign him to a noncombatant position.”

Marcel was the one who answered her question. Everyone fixed their gazes on him, and without meeting anyone’s eyes, he looked down and continued speaking.

“We’re special officers, and the army invested money in our training. Honestly, they don’t have enough personnel to go around, so they’re paying salaries to new special officers in advance under the condition that they’ll get higher education later down the line. So an injury isn’t a good enough reason to discharge someone... Even if an officer sustains an injury so severe that they can no longer fight, the army will just propose that they stay on as a noncombatant.”

Shin, who’d been his colleague in the special officer academy, wasn’t present, so whoever was aware of Marcel’s injury only knew by hearsay that he used to be a Vánagandr pilot before he was injured and changed posts to a control officer.

“And besides, there are plenty of special officers who stay in the army because they don’t have any other way to earn a living, so they don’t quit unless things get really bad. And, um...with the Eighty-Six, it’s, uh... Well, between the education they gave you as officers and the special treatment you get, the army spent a lot of money on you...

So I can't imagine they'll just cut you loose that easily."

"But...", Anju started hesitantly, but then she decided not to speak.

"He can't be a Processor anymore," Dustin said it for her.

No Eighty-Six, not even a Name Bearer, could handle operating a polypedal combat vehicle with only one hand. Armored-weapon warfare required split-second reactions that often made the difference between life and death. It was too difficult to handle piloting maneuvers that required two hands with only one. Especially with the Reginleif, which was specialized for high-mobility combat.

Reattaching his severed hand was a lost cause, since it had sunk under the waves. Which left...

"What about a prosthetic...?" Raiden asked, almost as if clinging to that final hope.

"—I assumed this might come up, so I asked some technical officers from the United Kingdom and the Alliance," Bernholdt said indifferently. "But neither nation has artificial limbs advanced enough to endure Reginleif combat."

The great countries to the north and south both boasted highly advanced technology. The United Kingdom could have had artificial limbs based on Sirin technology, and the Alliance had the sensory-coupling technology used in the Stollenwurm.

"The United Kingdom's prosthetics are built for use in their heavily armored Barushka Matushkas. They're not responsive enough for use even in a Vánagandr, to say nothing of a Reginleif. The Alliance's prosthetics are more agile and accurate, but since the Stollenwurm's piloting system is built around the sensory coupling from the ground up, the technology isn't compatible with the Reginleif."

"Captain Olivia has also mentioned the mental strain that technology creates," Michihi appended. "Most of the Alliance's citizens are drafted into the military and have nerve-coupling ports implanted into them, so they're not afraid of having an artificial limb's operation port set directly in their heads. But for outsiders, such as people from the Federacy and us, it just feels like we're getting foreign objects put into our bodies, and most people are afraid of going through with it..."

"And even if you went that far, modifying the Reginleif to work with the nerve-coupling system would be too much trouble just for Theo's sake. Both sides of this would be too hard to pull off."

"Didn't the Republic have, um, biological technology or quasi-biological technology or something before the war?" Marcel asked apprehensively. "Could they produce a prosthetic you can move as well as the original or something?"

Before the war, the Republic specialized in research on cultivating and re-creating biological tissue from artificial materials. The quasi-nerve crystals used in the RAID Device were one result of that research.

Putting aside whether Theo, as an Eighty-Six, would be willing to use something created by the Republic, it was an option. But sensing the gazes on him, Dustin shook his head gently.

"If it were before the large-scale offensive, maybe that would have been possible... But not anymore... Not now..."

Many of the researchers and technicians behind the Republic's technologies had been wiped out during the large-scale offensive. Their records weren't completely lost, so these technologies could eventually be picked up and perfected. But it wouldn't happen in the immediate future.

"..."

Whatever anyone could do to help Theo had already been done. There was nothing more, but that didn't make the situation any easier to accept. Raiden could only settle into melancholic silence.

Eighteen of the Brisingamen squadron's members had died or gone missing during the battle. Some were caught up in the railgun's self-destruction, and others failed to escape the naval fortress's collapse or crashed into the burning sea. Only a handful of them were confirmed dead and had their remains collected. As for the rest, not even a fragment of their units could be dragged out of the ocean.

One among them was the squadron's vice captain, Shana.

"They say she climbed all the way up to the top floor to snipe down the enemy, and that's why she failed to get away. Not that she was ever any good at snipin'..."

Shiden was one of the few who'd been rescued on time. Lena came to visit her and remained standing in the entrance to her hospital room, which felt small and cramped, as battleship cabins often did. Shiden was sitting on her bed, bandages wrapped around various parts of her body, and she'd buried her head in her knees. The lights to the cabin were off, and the white sheets were as ruffled as the roiling waves.

"...I guess that's one way to go."

Right before Cyclops crashed into the ocean, Shiden's Resonance with Shana cut off, never to reconnect.

"She said, 'So cold.' Those were her last words... She probably bled out."

"...Shiden," Lena muttered.

"I think it's been some four years and change. That's how long I've

known her. We couldn't stand each other at first. We clashed a lot early on. But then all our squad mates started dyin' one by one, so we had to start getting along whether we liked it or not. In the end, it was just me and her, burying our squad captain. And even then, we kept telling each other to dig the next hole, saying shit like, 'You're next.'"

And in that way, through arguing, butting heads, and cooperating through it all, they survived that battlefield of certain death together. They even survived the large-scale offensive and fought their way out of the Eighty-Sixth Sector together with the Federacy's help.

They survived it all together, and yet...

Shiden grasped at her red, wavy hair.

"If she'd have died back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector...in the battlefield we knew, she'd have still gone where she belonged. I dunno if that's heaven or hell or whatever, but I'd have rested easy knowing she went there. Even without a grave, she wouldn't have left a body behind. Even if an animal had gotten to her remains, and she eventually returned to the earth...I could live with that. But..."

Those who die at sea, the sunken ones... Their corpses never surface.

"What happens to those who drown...? Do they go to the same place everyone else does? Will she be there when it's my time to go...? Or did those leviathans take her away?"

Instead of that stupid, aggravating...and awe-inspiring Reaper?

Lena gently lowered her eyes. She imagined it. The dark depths of the ocean, where no light could reach. The image of Shana's body being battered and crushed by the pressure, dragged along with the current, and left in the home of terrible, nameless creatures.

Had she died on the surface, her remains would have broken apart, consumed by bloodthirsty animals and swept away by the wind and rain. It was perhaps not all that different.

"I'm sure you'll meet her there."

Lena snuck a glance at her. Shiden's pale left eye, like snow in the shade, seemed to light up in the faint darkness. It looked back at Lena as Shiden gave a short, confident nod.

If they died in the same place, they'd find their way to the same place. If that was something Shiden and the Eighty-Six could believe in, after they'd discarded all belief in God and heaven, then it must be true.

"Because you're both Eighty-Six. You, Shana, all your comrades—you'll find your rest in the same place... That's what I think."

"...Now then. With regards to the pursuit of the new Legion unit, the Noctiluca, and the Strike Package's next operation."

The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package comprised four armored

divisions, with each division's commander supervising the Processors in their group. Shin was the 1st Armored Division's commander, which was currently stationed in the Fleet Countries. The 2nd Armored Division, which was currently in training in the Federacy's headquarters base, was commanded by Siri.

The 3rd Armored Division and its commander were currently on leave in the base's attached school, while the 4th Armored Division and its commander were stationed in the Alliance of Wald at present. Despite the great distances between them, the four captains assembled via the communication lines.

Out of the people hurt in the Mirage Spire operation, only the severely injured could be admitted to the military hospital. Those with relatively light injuries were instead detained in the moored Stella Maris's medical block.

Shin lay in one of the medical block's beds. He was injured when he plummeted into the ocean, and perhaps due to lack of blood or having his stamina generally depleted, trying to get up gave him spells of dizziness.

He let out a breath. Siri furrowed his brow in the holo-window that was being transmitted from the information terminal on his own side table, albeit without any intent to find fault with him.

"Before we do that... Nouzen, are you all right? There's your injury, of course, and Rikka's situation..."

"...Yeah." Shin thought to say he was fine, but he reconsidered and shook his head.

Of course, they weren't all fine. Theo, a comrade who had survived even the Special Reconnaissance mission alongside him, was forced to leave the lines of battle. Though it was due to injury and not death...it was a pain they were constantly aware of, regardless of whether anyone pointed it out. A pain they had to bear.

"I think we're all pretty shaken up by this. If I say anything that sounds excessive, feel free to call me out."

"I know how you feel. Even if you know it might happen, even when you think you're used to it, having a friend leave active duty like this...hurts."

A boy who shared the same window as Siri nodded. He had dark skin and a slender face. His hair was reddish-brown, and he wore silver-rimmed glasses. This was Canaan Nyuud, the 3rd Armored Division's commander and the captain of its first squadron: the Longbow squadron.

That Longbow squadron had the same name as the western front's first defensive unit back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. This boy was its vice captain at the time; its captain perished in the large-scale offensive.

"And it applies all the more when they're a comrade you've been together with for so long. Somewhere deep down, you just take it for granted that they'll always get out of any scrape... I know that feeling. It's the same for us."

This was said by someone in a separate holo-window from the other two—a girl with long red hair tied in a braid. Suiu Tohkanya, the 4th Armored Division's commander and the captain of its first squadron, the Sledgehammer squadron.

The original Sledgehammer squadron, which was the first defensive unit in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's northern front, had been completely wiped out during the large-scale offensive, with the exception of its captain. As such, Suiu and her squadron, which was in charge of the second ward, inherited their name.

"That's why I wanted to give you more time to rest before this conference." Siri sighed. "But at times like these, the Federacy's military can't keep up its act of being nice, patient adults."

"That's fine by me. They feel pressed for time—both for this conference and deciding the operation in general."

The Strike Package had discovered the Noctiluca's position only this morning. Even if the telegraph to the Fleet Countries was shared immediately with the Federacy, not even a single day had passed yet.

"I guess the bigwigs are just in that much of a panic. The railgun shredded the Republic's walls and destroyed four Federacy bases in a single day, and now it's back. I don't think we can blame them."

"Let's compare and adjust what we know about this state of emergency for the time being... The Fleet Countries' report says the Noctiluca sustained heavy damage and escaped underwater, and its whereabouts have been unknown since. The supercarrier couldn't pursue it, and the fixed sonar in the Fleet Countries' territorial waters also didn't pick up on it, either. It probably hasn't escaped to the open sea, either, because that's the leviathans' turf. Which implies it's been moving along the borders between the open sea and the territorial waters owned by we humans. Right?"

"Yes... The Fleet Countries sent battleships to look for it instead of the *Stella Maris*. But...its sound signatures were recorded during the battle. With the conditions lined up just so, they should be able to pick up on it even if it's gotten pretty far. But they haven't found it yet."

Shin furrowed his brow bitterly.

"If only I could have tracked its movement... I'm sorry. I couldn't move after the operation."

When he'd heard the other survivors, Theo included, had been collected and brought in for medical treatment, the tension that kept him conscious probably ran out. Everything suddenly went black, and his memories ended there. When he came to, he was in a hospital bed, and the Noctiluca's voice had disappeared into the distance.

"I've heard how badly injured you were. No one's blaming you. If anything, you're out of your mind for going to the bridge in that condition."

"And you got hurt during the operation, so you probably couldn't walk on your own right after you were injured. You should have stayed in bed if you couldn't even stand on your own two feet."

"With the commander doing crazy stuff like that, your subordinates have to pull insane stunts to keep up with you. You should know it causes trouble for everyone else."

"..."

Shin fell silent, not so much as groaning. He didn't intentionally do something crazy this time. Siri huffed a long, indignant breath

from his nose.

"Anyway, back to the Noctiluca. If we're allowed a bit of wishful thinking, maybe it just sank and died after the battle."

"That's obviously not what happened, though," Canaan cut into Siri's words. "It's more likely it just left the range that Nouzen can hear."

Siri's expression became more displeased. Ignoring him, Canaan adjusted his glasses with his middle finger.

"But that said, it's not likely it could move to the continent's north, east, or west with that giant gaping hole in its flank. The Legion wouldn't have bases that far out anyway. It'll need repairs, and it has to restock its ammunition, too. It probably doesn't need help generating power, though, what with its nuclear reactor."

"So that means it needs to find a Weisel and an Admiral somewhere. But except for the Mirage Spire, no other country has reported detecting any of the Legion's naval bases."

Based on what Ishmael had told Shin, the other areas of the ocean along the northern shores of the continent weren't as fit for building naval bases over the water. The distance to the seafloor and the leviathans' territories made it difficult to establish a base on the same level as the Mirage Spire in those regions.

"So with all that in mind, the Noctiluca has to be hiding somewhere along the continent's northern coast. And there has to be a Legion production base of appropriate size and scale. So the Strike Package's next mission is to pursue the Noctiluca and, at the same time, launch a simultaneous attack on multiple production bases."

"Our objective is to destroy the Noctiluca and gather intelligence. We were also told to prioritize seizing Weisel production parts; especially their control cores."

The Legion didn't use human speech, and with the Eintagsfliege covering their territories, they also didn't use transmission or engage in external relations or trade. The only way of gathering intelligence on them, except for observing their movements in real time, was to capture a production base's command core and draw information about their production line and other matters.

"We'll be raiding the Legion so they don't have time to assume defensive positions, which means we'll finally be utilizing the new equipment we had to pass off on deploying in the Mirage Spire. The Armée Furieuse."

The Armée Furieuse—the Reginleif's new armament. Putting it to use aboard the supercarrier in the last operation was deemed too difficult. After all, the possibility of launching a surprise raid on the Mirage Spire itself was close to zero, considering the very nature of the operation, and so the application of this new equipment was put off.

On top of that, by the time the operation in the Fleet Countries was complete, only Shin's 1st Armored Division was effectively trained in using it. They couldn't afford to reveal this new armament to the Legion now over a single base.

"This time, Siri's group has received appropriate training, and my 3rd Armored Division will be joining as well," Canaan said. "We'll be able to attack at least three sites at once... We finished our training as soon as possible and entered our trial period. Colonel Grethe and our tactical commander frowned upon it, but well, we're used to it. We're Eighty-Six, after all."

They hadn't been given a single day of vacation in the Eighty-

Sixth Sector, and despite that, they survived years of battle. Only those who could retrain their fighting prowess without rest were allowed to survive in that environment.

"The 4th Armored Division will stay on leave and remain in HQ as a reserve force, but we're set to prioritize training over our leave," Suiui said. "We're up against the Legion here; we can never predict what might happen. We need to master the Armée Furieuse ASAP."

"...And because you guys had to bring that up, Colonel Grethe's been screeching like a banshee... She's been saying that once the war's over, none of us are getting discharged until we catch up on our studies and finish all our mandatory subjects."

Siri's eyes were distant as he spoke. Apparently, he'd been scolded with Canaan in Suiui's place, since she was stationed in the Alliance.

"...Well, yeah..." Suiui said, a thin, ironic smile on her lips. "I appreciate that the Colonel...that the *Federacy* feels that way. Combat isn't the only thing that matters."

"Honestly, since they've been having us go to school, I'd like to attend until we finish all the mandatory subjects we left behind," Canaan said. "It's been so long that I'd forgotten, but being a student is fun."

"Even after coming to the Federacy, I had to doubt whether or not the war was actually going to end. But I guess we can't keep thinking about the possibility of it going on forever."

Over the last six months, the Strike Package had been dispatched to the countries bordering the Federacy's fronts. In the same way that Shin and the 1st Armored Division met the Sirins in the United Kingdom and the Open Sea clans in the Fleet Countries, Siri, Canaan, and Suiui had many experiences during their own missions.

They'd had many experiences that would have been impossible for them in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where they'd been trapped between human malice and an army of the Legion.

"It'll take us commanders a while to catch up on our curriculum," Shin said with a bit of a forced smile.

"No kidding..."

"You always find the worst thing to say, don't you?"

"Let's leave it at that for now. We can bitch about that all we want once the war's over."

The four commanders, as well as the squad captains and their lieutenants, were expected to complete their special officer curriculum on top of the regular one, and none of them had properly finished the former.

Canaan's eyes wavered oddly behind his glasses as he suggested they return to the topic at hand.

"Since we're set to seize more than just three bases, the Federacy is planning to send in a few more units. But because the Federacy's military doesn't have any spare forces they can extract, the major nobles' private armies will be requisitioned and incorporated into the operation. That comes up to less than ten regiments, but they'll be bringing them all in for this operation."

This made Shin realize that the military's top brass really were at the ends of their ropes. The Federacy's military could no longer advance through frontal assaults, which was why the Strike Package had been established. But now they had requisitioned forces from outside the army and were bringing them along with a unit meant to gather intelligence.

This indicated that the military's top brass felt greatly threatened by the Noctiluca—or rather, by the Legion's intentions. Or perhaps they had *another purpose* in mind and were simply hiding it behind the objective of countering the Noctiluca.

Requisitioning private troops and gathering them into a military unit—even if it totaled less than ten regiments—wasn't something that could be done in the space of a day. This must have been something they'd been planning to do ahead of time.

Perhaps this started a month ago, when Shin had revealed the possibility of stopping the Legion. One of the keys for that objective was the hidden base, so it was likely that they thought of including private armies to augment the Federacy's lacking forces in the capture of this base.

"Roger. So which base is the 1st Armored Division supposed to attack?"

"Right, it's in the country you were supposed to visit after the Fleet Countries, Nouzen. The Holy Theocracy of Noiryannaruse."

The nation stood as the leader of the Aurata-native countries, which were located in the continent's far northwest. It was a foreign country that was farther than the Republic and several other small countries. It didn't share borders with the Republic or the Federacy, and its culture and language were entirely different.

It seems the Republic and the small countries to the far west had all been ravaged by the Legion War. Two months ago, the United Kingdom intercepted a transmission that confirmed the continued existence of some nations out in that area. Apparently, in the eleven years since the Legion War began, they fought while surrounded on all sides by the enemy. The Holy Theocracy, located on the northernmost tip of the far west, had been and was currently still battling the Legion in a place known as the blank sector.

The blank sector was a peninsula that had been uninhabited since before the Legion War even began. To that end, several large-scale production bases had been approved for construction there since the early stages of the war.

As a result, the Theocracy's position in the war was quite precarious. The 1st Armored Division was supposed to assist them before it was dispatched to the Fleet Countries. The Noctiluca's appearance had somewhat changed their objectives there, but they were still being sent to the same place.

Yes.

Shin narrowed his eyes. The blank sector on the northernmost tip of the continent's *west*. Before he lost consciousness on the bridge, Shin could hear that the Noctiluca was headed west.

"It's been decided that the 1st Armored Division will be going west, where the Noctiluca is most likely to have gone... I hope you get the chance to take your revenge."

“—I’m sure you realize this, but we can’t have you join the dispatch to the Theocracy, Vika. We have to be wary of letting information that relates to our national defense leak, like your adorable little birds.”

Much like how Lena, as the tactical commander, and Raiden, who had filled in for Shin as operations commander, were busy with the outcome of the operation, Vika had his own duties as a prince of the United Kingdom and a dispatched officer. He’d reported the details of the Mirage Spire operation and made an appeal for assistance in tracking the Noctiluca.

Having concluded the inquiries on that matter, his older brother added that warning, to which Vika nodded in response. He was in his room in the base they were stationed in, in one of the Fleet Countries’ port towns.

The Holy Theocracy of Noiryantaruse. The *mad* country, Noiryantaruse.

“I know, Brother Zafar. That country’s values clash with ours too much, enough so that we would call it a mad country. A country without the minimal respect for morality is not one we could trust as a friendly nation. I believe the Federacy has no intention of disclosing any details regarding the Sensory Resonance or Nouzen’s ability, either.”

“That’s what I thought... Oh yes, I should warn you about this, too. Just to be on the safe side.”

“I know already. I won’t tell the Eighty-Six the reason the Theocracy is called a mad country.”

Zafar smiled elegantly, as if to say, *Very good*.

“I’d appreciate it if you could try to use this leave of yours to trade information with the Federacy’s generals. As you’ve so aptly put, the Mirage Spire and the Noctiluca strike me as odd. Oh, and speaking of leaves...”

His older brother, the crown prince, spoke casually, and so Vika expected to be scolded for something minor and ordinary and wasn’t on guard. As such...

“...there’s something you’ve been hiding from me ever since the Strike Package’s leave at the Alliance. Right?”

...this took Vika completely by surprise. Even he, with all his intelligence, was startled by this remark. But without so much as changing his expression—indeed, he was so confident he didn’t so much as furrow a brow or flip a single lock of hair—he answered:

“Of course not. I would never hide anything from you, Brother Zafar.”

The Legion are preparing for a second large-scale offensive and are attempting to modify and improve themselves.

Vika told his father, the king; and Zafar, the crown prince, that this was all the information Zelene had given them. He didn’t tell them about the shutdown method for the entirety of the Legion because it was *realistically unusable*, and sharing that information would needlessly impact the Federacy’s standing among the other

nations of the continent.

He didn't share this information, not even with them.

Zafar's smile remained unchanged.

"I see. So you've finally learned to hide these secrets you don't have...even from me."

"...Brother Zafar."

"*Thank goodness.* You seem to be getting along with the Eighty-Six, at least."

And yet Zafar looked back at him with an exceedingly happy expression.

"Children rebelling against their parents and older siblings and beginning to prioritize promises with their friends is a sign of growth... In which case, I shall assume you have no secrets to keep from me."

He would overlook this—out of respect for his precious little brother.

"If the war ends, what do you say to studying abroad in one of the Federacy's universities? You've hardly gone to school during this war, after all. I think you'd do well to enjoy the life of a student once this is finally over."

A faint, bitter smile found its way to Vika's lips. It was an expression he only ever showed his father and eldest brother...

You say I've matured, Brother Zafar, and yet you continue to treat me like a child.

"Should you and Father permit me to do so."

Once the war was finally over... What would Shin and the rest of the Eighty-Six do then? The question crossed his mind not so much out of interest but sheer curiosity. When they first came to the United Kingdom, they didn't have an answer to that question, but what about now?

What would Theo say now that he could no longer stand upon the battlefield in the same capacity as his comrades?

Ending his transmission, Vika powered off his terminal and turned to face the figure who had waited for his conversation to end, never uttering a word.

"...How many times do I have to tell you not to go out and get yourself broken?"

"My shame knows no bounds..."

Having finally reactivated, Lerche was once again missing roughly half her body. This time, rather than being shattered horizontally, approximately half her frame was missing at a diagonal angle. Her cooling and power systems were in a terrible state of disrepair. Her face, modeled after that of a young woman, had part of the skin peeled off. She looked like a drowned corpse that had been picked at by fish.

Looking her up and down, Vika sighed. It would take time to fix this much damage.

"Well, now I have things to attend to once I return to the Federacy, and as you've heard, I won't be participating in the next dispatch, so I do have time. But be sure not to waste too much of it."

“Your Highness, what happened to the Noctiluca after I—?”

“We dealt it a crippling blow, but it got away. Since you didn’t know that, you’re probably unaware that Nouzen survived the battle. I expect that the list of survivors and deceased is also unknown to you.”

“I—I see. So Sir Reaper...survived. That’s good to know. And what of Sir Yuuto? Sir Werewolf? Lady Snow Witch? The Cyclops Princess... and Sir Fox, who was the last one standing?”

Vika blinked once coldly. He didn’t have enough free time on his hands to go over the status of each and every member, and unlike Shin and Lena, he didn’t know each individual member that well, either.

“For now, don’t mention Rikka’s name in front of Nouzen, Shuga, Emma, and Kukumila.”

“Does that mean...?”

“He’s not dead, but he also didn’t come out unscathed. I’ll put the details and the other casualties in a report and send them to you, so check for yourself later.”

Lerche sighed dejectedly. The Sirins didn’t breathe, but Vika did enable them to express emotion this way.

“I...see. That’s... I’m sure Sir Reaper feels a great deal of anguish...”

“We’ve had a surprisingly large number of casualties this time around. Everyone’s quite broken up over it, Nouzen included.”

“As they would be... That’s very much something that should go unmentioned in front of Sir Reaper, Sir Werewolf, Lady Snow Witch, and Lady Sniper.” Then, with an air of timidity, Lerche added, “Your Highness, I hope that my retrieval wasn’t in any way given priority and that no one’s life was lost as a result...?”

Vika cocked an eyebrow at that question. Something like that would trouble a Sirin such as Lerche.

“That wasn’t the case, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

Changing the order of which victims were rescued first in the name of his own personal feelings would put his position as a leader to shame. Regardless of how he or even the Sirins felt about it, Frederica and the Fleet Countries’ rescue crews placed the Sirins at the bottom of the priority bracket. Lerche being rescued in the process was a thing of coincidence.

“Someone else happened to crash in the same spot you did, so they picked you up with them. I believe it was someone named Saki or some such, from the Thunderbolt squadron. Be sure to thank them if you see them. I’d imagine the two of you together were pretty heavy.”

Apparently, this Saki person had taken a point-blank shot from a rapid-fire gun. They’d been blown away and rolled off the Noctiluca, and as they were waiting for rescue, Lerche’s Chaika had fallen from

it, too.

Saki had somehow forced Chaika's cockpit open before it sank and pulled Lerche's remains out. Even as the rescue boat picked him up, no one seemed to notice that Lerche was a Sirin. Vika had resigned himself to the fact that Lerche had been lost forever before he heard the report...

Oh yes.

Casting a nonchalant gaze out the window, he appended:

"I'd forgotten to say this, but you've done well to return... I will grant you that much."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lerche curl her lips up into a small smile.

"You have my gratitude."

"...Hmm. Don't get me wrong, okay? I'm not saying there's anything bad about this or asking why you're still alive. I'm really, really happy you made it, but..."

The injured soldiers were accommodated in a large room designated for the hospital's inpatients. The building was old, but remarkably clean. Sitting on a round chair, Rito fixed a wavering, emotional gaze on the figure who was calmly reclining on the bed.

"I'm surprised you made it out safely, Yuuto."

"You and me both."

Safely would hardly sound accurate to anyone who saw his condition without context. Yuuto nodded, wrapped in bandages and his limbs covered in plastic casts. He had severe bruises and several fractured bones, including his rib cage, causing a collapsed lung—which was externally visible.

But even with all that in mind, considering his rig had been smashed by an 800 mm long turret weighing in the hundreds of tonnes, the fact that he was alive at all was nothing short of a miracle. As if to take the blow for him, his Juggernaut had been damaged beyond repair.

"Having your ribs broken on both sides and a hole in one of your lungs is hell," Yuuto said, his voice as flat as ever and not at all evoking any of that agony. "It hurts to breathe, but it's not like I can do anything about that. Makes me curse the fact that I survived."

"Oh, does it hurt to talk, too?" Rito asked apologetically. "Maybe I should have come later."

"No, it's good to have you around. Having someone to speak with is a distraction, and you don't know when to shut up."

"That felt like an insult," Rito said with a pout, but he didn't seem to take any real offense to it.

Yuuto was always taciturn, but today, he was oddly talkative. He probably really did need something to take his mind off the pain. It assailed him with every breath, and one could only resist breathing for so long. And...

"I'm lucky to be alive, so I'd rather not complain. Having a distraction is a huge help."

...he also needed to take his mind off the emotional pain of losing their dead comrades. Many members from Yuuto's Thunderbolt squadron were either dead or missing, especially the vanguards. Much like Shiden and the Brisingamen squadron, their squadrons would need to be broken up and reorganized until the next operation. But it was unlikely that Yuuto would recover in time for that.

"...Yeah. But I'd bet breathing still hurts, so I'll just talk your ear off for now. I'll tell you what happened while you were knocked out. Oh yeah, the leviathan! I think they called it a Musukura. Tell me what it was like when you get better!"

"...Sorry, I was unconscious underwater when it showed up."

"Oh right. Then, um... I guess I can't ask Cap'n Nouzen about it, but I can ask the prince! But I'm assuming he'd think it was too boring to talk about, or like, his impression of it would be weird in its own way... He'd probably say it looked tasty or something. I can imagine the prince making that kinda comment. I suppose I'll just have to ask the cap'n about it sometime later!"

"..."

Really, he doesn't know when to shut up. Or it's more like he's just so excitable that he ends up going off the rails. And at times like these...it's exactly what the doctor ordered.

Rito did not possess the shadow of death that seemed to hang over so many of the other Eighty-Six. He could always talk about the next day without a care in the world. He pressed on, confident that he would always live to see tomorrow.

I'm a survivor, too... I survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector, the large-scale offensive... I even survived that climb toward death on the Mirage Spire. I survived. I'm alive. So perhaps, I've earned the privilege of thinking about the future...

He thought back to before the operation began—to the captain of the anti-leviathan vessel who had shown him the view of the horizon from the lighthouse. She was the one who'd told him to come visit her again, mere days before she sailed beyond the waves as a decoy, never to return.

His mind went to Shin, who'd told them of how he'd seen the leviathan skeleton when he was younger. It had been a silly, heartwarming conversation that showed Yuuto that even the stone-faced Reaper once had a cute side to him—a side that admired and

was enthralled by the sight of a giant monster.

So maybe now, it was all right. Maybe now, Yuuto could also pick up the juvenile, trifling dreams of a childhood he had to discard in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

“...In that case, let me ask you something as well.”

Rito looked at him curiously. Yuuto gave a small shrug, despite the great effort it took to pull off the gesture.

“About the leviathan skeleton... I’d like to see it for myself next time.”

Next time, he would go there as a simple tourist. Once the war ended... Just like that captain told him to. Her final wish to him.

“And for what it’s worth...a crew member told me that certain types of leviathans really do taste good. They slice fresh ones into little pieces, cook them with fish, and eat them.”

“...They actually eat those things...?”

“Well, they *are* animals, technically...I think...?”

Yeah, animals that shoot lasers...

“...They count as animals, right?”

“Don’t ask me, Yuuto!”

Upon hearing the loud roar of the ocean tides overtaking the receding sound of heavy machinery, Kurena had realized the Stella Maris had arrived at port. Her Juggernaut’s system was in standby mode. But when a holo-window suddenly appeared in front of her, Kurena—who was squatting inside Gunslinger’s cockpit—sluggishly raised her head.

Checking the window, she saw Frederica standing next to Gunslinger.

“—What?”

Kurena didn’t bother opening the unit’s canopy, instead asking the question curtly through the external speaker. Hearing her booming voice, Frederica froze up.

“...I-it’s just that it’s almost time for the Processors to head out. How about you eat something before that? You’ve been in there for nearly half a day now. Going so long without food will hardly do you well, and your body requires rest. And so—”

“I’ll be fine.”

“But...”

“I said I’ll be fine... So I didn’t eat for a day—so what? In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, there were tons of times where we spent entire days fighting. Stuff like that happened in the Federacy, too. I wouldn’t be here right now if hunger was enough to kill me.”

“Step aside, squirt.”

Someone else was probably standing in her optical sensor’s blind spot, because those last words had been spoken by someone she couldn’t see. Soon after, the canopy lifted up without her triggering it.

Someone had input the emergency passcode that all Juggernauts shared and pulled up the canopy's external unlocking lever.

Kurena reflexively glared ahead, now locking eyes with a figure clad in the same steel-colored flight suit as her. An Eighty-Six girl, one of the platoon captains from Shiden's and Shana's Brisingamen squadron. Mika.

"The ship's dining hall keeps track of those who come in to eat and *those who don't*. Every single one of the cooks is anxious because one girl hasn't shown up at all."

She shoved a tray of cold food in Kurena's direction, but Kurena curtly looked away. Mika's brow twitched.

"Plus—and I know you're pretending as hard as you can to avoid noticing this fact—we docked ages ago. All the injured soldiers were transported already, and they need to carry the Juggernauts out. All the Processors are preparing to disembark, except for the ones who've been hospitalized here... Do I have to spell it out? You sitting there and brooding is getting in the way of their work. And what about the debriefing? Two of your squad's captains are out of commission, and Raiden has to fill in as operations commander. Meanwhile, you're here slacking off when you're not even hurt."

Kurena could see some familiar faces from the maintenance crew looking over at them from a short distance away. She realized, perhaps too late, that all the Spearhead squadron's other Juggernauts had already been carried off the ship. They'd likely left her for last out of consideration for her.

And as Mika said, Shin was unconscious, Raiden was filling in for him, and Theo...had been hurried off to surgery as soon as he was picked up. With all three of them gone and Kurena staying in the cockpit, the highest-ranking officers who could handle debriefing were Anju and the 4th Platoon's captain. She could imagine how difficult that was.

She glared at Mika, seeking to shake off the guilt. As if to tell her to stop saying things that made sense.

"...Go on, say it. This isn't about me making trouble for everyone else; you just hate me. Go on, say it. Shana's death was my fault—that's what you *want* to say, right?!"

Mika suddenly reached out and grabbed Kurena by her uniform's collar, jerking her closer.

"That's what *you* want me to say," she said, almost close enough for their noses to touch, the golden irises of her green Aventura eyes glinting with frozen fury. "But I'm not gonna play your game... Shana died because she fought. She chose, on her own, to fight to her last breath. And you don't get...to take responsibility for that.

You're just projecting your guilt so you can wallow in self-pity...

Letting others heap the blame on you would only give you an easy out. I won't let that happen.

“Not you. Not when you couldn't fight in the middle of an operation because you were anxious over Shin going missing or Theo getting hurt. Not you...! What's your problem?! Shin survived, and so did Theo, dammit! You guys got off *easy*! We lost Shana, Alto, Sanna, Hani, and Meryo! None of them are coming back! But *we're* still alive, so now's not the time to sit there hugging your knees!”

Kurena's golden pupils contracted. My *game*? We got off *easy*...?!

She grabbed onto Mika's own collar and snarled.

“You call that ‘getting off easy’?! How is that better?!”

Both Theo and me... We Eighty-Six, we're...!

“Fighting is all we have. We don't have families or homes or anything else. If we lose that... If we can't even fight anymore...”

Pride—the final vestige of their identity. Everything else had been taken away by the Republic, and all they had left was their war-forged, battle-tempered, and hard-won pride.

And now...even that was fading away.

“So if that's gone...what are we?!”

The question never lingered long in her mind, but currently, it was staring her dead in the face. The reality of being robbed of that pride—and having to live on in its absence—was being thrust before her very eyes. She had to confront the fact that a future where they'd have to stop being Eighty-Six could happen to her and to Theo. So how...?

“How can I stay calm...?”

Letting out a childish, all too pathetic whimper, Kurena pushed Mika away and ran. When Mika first grabbed her, she'd knocked away the food tray. Looking down and realizing what she'd done, Mika turned around to find that Frederica was now carrying it in her small hands. Apparently, she'd caught it when Mika had unintentionally pushed it away.



“...I might’ve gone too far,” Mika muttered.

She didn’t feel the slightest bit guilty about telling Kurena off, but Theo didn’t deserve that. Though she’d said he’d gotten off easy because he wasn’t dead...that was not true for him.

To the Eighty-Six, being rendered unable to battle was no better than death. It could even be worse. After all, fighting until one’s last breath was the pride of the Eighty-Six. To lose that was to lose the one thing that defined them above all else.

So yes, coming to this conclusion would make one stop talking altogether. After a moment of reflection, Mika realized she had crossed a line with Kurena.

“Hey, squirt, you wanna eat this instead?”

“Absolutely not!”

Running out of the hangar, as if to escape Mika, Kurena felt her legs naturally carry her to the Stella Maris’s hospital block. To Shin. She wanted to hear his voice. To see his face.

...Kurena.

Just like those old times in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, when Kurena would be consumed by her rage and resentment toward the white pigs. He would always be there next to her, silently soothing her with his calm, serene voice.

Taking the last turn, Kurena stopped in her tracks. There was already someone else standing in front of the hospital room she was heading for. They had the bluish-silver locks of an Adularia and striking argent eyes. Their physique was large and burly, and they had a military chaplain’s armband on their sleeve.

“Ah, Reverend...”

The tall priest turned his large, bearlike head to face her. He was taller than Raiden, dwarfing even Daiya and Kujo. Kurena stood at an average height for a girl, and he had to look down to meet her eyes. It was...

...just like the group of Alba who had looked down at Kurena and her older sister, sneering at them and their parents’ corpses.

“...Ah.”

She could still feel them towering over her. At the time, she was small and young, and all adults felt like giants. But those men were like the tyrannical giants of myth. She stood frozen, the scene playing out in her mind. Muzzle flashes ripping through the dark of night. The air, thick with the scent of blood. Maddened, demonic laughter and glints of silver.

She felt all the blood drain from her face. Turning on her heel,

Kurena fled.

After receiving a status report on the severely injured Processors, like Theo and Yuuto, Lena returned to the Stella Maris to pay a visit to the wounded. She was walking through the cramped corridors of the supercarrier. Just as she was about to enter the medical block, she almost bumped into Kurena, who was running out of it, and hurriedly evaded her.

Looking at her sprint away like a frightened rabbit, Lena saw her off with a dubious glance. Setting her gaze ahead again, she spotted the priest standing there silently.

"I'm sorry." Lena hurried over to him. "That was impolite of her. My apologies, as her commander..."

"...No, it's fine." The priest shook his head and turned to face her. "Considering what those children had been put through, it wasn't the least bit rude. It makes sense that she would fear my silver hair and eyes."

Lena blinked a few times in surprise.

"She was...afraid of you?"

The Eighty-Six, Kurena included, always called the Alba white pigs and treated them with naked contempt, but she'd never seen them display fear.

"I think she was afraid of me, yes. A girl like her was forced into the internment camps when she was young... Seven years old, at my best guess. A child that small had been dragged and shouted at by grown adults. It must have been terrifying. She was exposed to overwhelming violence at that age and had no means of defending herself."

"..."

Lena fell into silence, ashamed of her ignorance. She had been raised in the First Sector, an area that, even long before the Legion War, had been primarily populated by Alba. She'd never seen the way the Eighty-Six were ferried to the internment camps. She'd imagined what it must have been like, but she never truly realized the intensity of the situation.

"...I think I see. It's my height. It must have reminded her of when she was a child being looked down upon by an adult, and that was the trigger. I should make it a point not to look down on them like that again."

"Reverend..."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm used to children being afraid of me. I mean, considering how large I am... When I first met the moody fellow asleep in this very room, he was just a little kitten. And let me tell

you, he was scared for his life.”

He gave an exaggerated shrug, as if to make it clear he was joking. Between that gesture and the mental image of a younger Shin cowering before him, Lena found her smile again. The man had likely joked around because he’d sensed her shame, and she appreciated the gesture.

Speaking of...

“Is Shin...? Is Captain Nouzen asleep? This early?”

Given that both Lena and Kurena were walking around, it was clearly too soon for lights-out. The priest wordlessly stepped away from the door, allowing her to glance inside the room. And indeed, she could hear Shin’s faint, rhythmic breathing.

The lights were still on. He was in the back of the room, but the bed was hidden from sight by a curtain... Though, he did truly seem to be asleep.

“His injuries took their toll on him, and he had a whole discussion with the other group commanders about pursuing the new Legion unit. It must have drained him.”

“...”

Shin wasn’t just exhausted because of his injury. What happened to Theo put a lot of emotional strain on him as well. And still, Shin forced himself to fulfill his duty for the Strike Package. She knew he was prone to doing that, and that was why she came to check on him... But she couldn’t help feeling that he was pushing himself too hard.

“The military physician asked him to stay put today. Could you tell him off for me tomorrow?”

The request made Lena blink in surprise. She could do that, yes... But wouldn’t it hold more weight coming from his father figure?

“I think you should be the one to tell him that, Reverend...,” she said gently.

“He’s too old to listen to what the man who raised him has to say. And besides, having you of all people scold him would be the most effective.”

Seeing the meaningful, sidelong glance the priest directed at her, Lena felt her cheeks flush.

...Well, yes.

Raiden did say just about everyone knew already, so she realized it only made sense that the priest would know, too. It was still embarrassing, though. Seeing her eyes dart about, the priest softened his gaze.

“When I saw him leave the internment camp, that boy had forgotten how to laugh...or cry.”

Lena looked back at him, but he’d already turned toward the

hospital room. His silver hair was fading into white, and his eyes were the color of the moon.

"I think your presence...is a big part of the reason he learned how to smile again."

Kurena returned to her room. Anju, her roommate, was out. The adjacent room was Frederica's, and the opposite room was Shiden's.

...And Shiden's roommate was Shana, who would never return.

TP, the black cat, had been loitering by the entrance and got to its feet upon noticing her. It tottered over to her, rubbed its head against her boots, and meowed. Kurena felt a small smile creep to her lips for the first time in a while.

"...Hey. I'm back."

Scratching its head gently, she picked the cat up. Years ago, Daiya had discovered it in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. It was just a kitten at the time, and despite Daiya being the one who found it, it seemed to latch on to Shin instead for some reason. Whenever Shin took a break from his routine tasks between their days spent fighting the Legion, the kitten would sit in its fixed position next to him. It would playfully paw at the pages of any book Shin was reading, but he never shooed it away.

Looking after the cat naturally meant being next to Shin, so Kurena was always near the two of them. The captain's room was a bit larger since it served as an office, and before long, everyone else came over to hang out.

"But now we...we hardly do anything like that anymore," she told TP, not directing the words directly at the cat.

The black cat looked up at her, its eyes transparent in a way a human's could never be. The base's bedrooms and offices didn't make the best hangouts. Instead, they had cafeterias, joint establishments, cafés, lounges, and recreation rooms. They were all more spacious than the captain's small room back in the day, allowing them to accommodate so many more people.

Each squadron naturally gathered in their own spot, but even still, it wasn't the same as having a place reserved just for them. There were too many eyes around, and she'd be too embarrassed to play with a kitten with that many people looking at her.

Most of the time, Shin was with Kurena and the other Spearhead members in their reserved seats at the back of the lounge, but he'd started using the base's study room more often. And before long, Raiden and Anju began doing the same, too. So did other Spearhead Processors.

"...Yeah, I know. I could just go with them."

If she was that lonely, she could simply follow after them and join in. If she was refusing to let go of her pride, then that was all the more reason to head to that room, which signified a place outside the battlefield.

It wasn't as if Shin, Raiden, or Anju had found anything particular to do outside of fighting. They were still only beginning to prepare, their eyes set on something vague that might exist beyond the scope of combat.

She could decide her future course so much later down the line. But still, she was scared. Every time she thought to go to the study room, her legs froze up. She was afraid she'd become aware of a future beyond the war. She didn't want to think about it.

It was possible many Eighty-Six shared this same emotion. A fixation on the battlefield, and an ardent, obstinate rejection of the future looming outside it. For all they knew, the moment they stepped past the boundaries of that familiar place, they could find that they had no solid ground to tread on.

They could never count on the future to be there. They could have died on any given day. They might not even live to see the next day. Having spent so long on the battlefield with no support to rely on, the resignation that had nestled so deeply within them couldn't be uprooted that easily.

They couldn't bring themselves to believe it—that if they simply wished for it, a future of happiness could come as soon as the next day.

The cat meowed in her arms. Kurena hugged it, burying her face in its fur.



Having concluded their duties, it was time for them to leave the Fleet Countries. But even on the day of their departure, the Strike Package's Processors remained gloomy. They'd completed the initial operational objective given to them when they were first deployed here. The Noctiluca had escaped, yes, but that was an unexpected development. As such, driving it away was commendable in its own right.

Supposedly.

The seabirds cried, unaware of the storms and wars that had raged across the ocean. Their voices echoed off the Stella Maris. It was moored just off the coast, like a ghost ship. From a distance, it didn't seem to be in bad shape, but it had sustained heavy internal damage that compromised its cruising capabilities.

After a decade of fighting, the diminutive Fleet Countries had depleted their already lacking national power and technological

strength. They could no longer repair it.

The supercarrier had completed its secret voyage and final operation. There was no point to hiding it from the Legion's sights in some covert port. And so it stood exposed off the shore. Its former crew, what few survivors remained from the Orphan Fleet, and even the townsfolk—they all looked as if the fire that had burned in them was snuffed out. The same fire they showed in the tumult of the festival before the voyage was gone, as if it had never been there.

"What are they gonna call themselves now? I mean, they can't call themselves the Fleet Countries anymore."

"Cut it out... You shouldn't say that."

"But I mean, what if—?"

What would we do if this had happened to us?

The young soldiers couldn't help but ask themselves that question. They couldn't simply see it as another country's problem. After all, they'd once had everything taken away from them. When they were led to the internment camps, their very identities—all that they used to be was stripped away. All the precious things they managed to hold on to, the lives they could have lived...

And the takers didn't care an ounce for any of it. So who was to say it wouldn't happen again?

No one could promise that it wouldn't.

Even back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, Shin would often get hurt when he pulled crazy stunts in battle. So after years of being his lieutenant, Raiden had gotten used to handling paperwork out of necessity.

But unlike the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where they were treated as disposable parts, the Federacy saw them as valued soldiers. So Raiden wasn't allowed to half-ass a report. Even with some of the staff officers taking over some of this work, there was still much to do.

Giving up on filling out a transport checklist, Raiden threw up his hands, ready to beg for assistance.

"Hey, sorry, could you give me a hand, Theo—?"

His eyes settled on Anju, who happened to be there. Holding back the urge to click his tongue, he simply looked up at the ceiling.

Right. He's not here anymore.

He could see Anju smiling at him. There was a certain darkness behind her eyes that made it feel as if she could see that he was pushing himself.

"I'll help, Raiden."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

She reached out and took half the list. But as soon as she skimmed

the first page with her sky-blue eyes, the final traces of light disappeared from her expression.

“...It ain’t easy to deal with. It’s harder than I thought,” Raiden said.

For both him and Anju, as well as Kurena, who wasn’t around at the moment...and, of course, Shin. The death of a friend was not an uncommon occurrence in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and that fact hadn’t changed much since coming to the Federacy.

However, a friend surviving but being rendered unable to fight—that was new. It was an unbearable pain almost equal to death, and they couldn’t get used to it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Raiden could spot Anju biting down on her lip. A while back, Grethe had encouraged the ladies of the Strike Package to get into the habit of makeup, and many of them wound up enjoying it. By now, Raiden had gotten used to seeing them like this. Anju had applied a faint rouge to her pale-pink lips.

“Yeah... At some point, I’d stopped considering the possibility that we’d lose any of the five of us,” she admitted.

Kurena hadn’t been willing to see it before the operation. But now that it was over, she found herself standing at the water’s edge. In an odd sort of role reversal, all her comrades had decided to abstain from coming here after returning. And so the shore was empty.

The day following the operation, the supercarrier’s crew and the townsfolk had all brought flowers to the shore to sympathize with the Processors, to the banks of the same sea that had swallowed up so many people—and Theo’s hand.

“...Kurena.”

Hearing a voice call her name, she turned around to find Shin standing there.

“I just barely managed to get permission to see Theo. I’m on my way there now... Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah!” She nodded hurriedly. “I’m fine now!”

Her voice was so cheery that it sounded off, even to her. Shin seemed to realize she was trying to gloss things over, but before he could say anything, Kurena spoke while looking into his considerate, bloodred eyes.

“Er, could you tell him I said I’m sorry...? When it happened, I was no help at all...”

She’d frozen up and couldn’t shoot. Both when they were fighting the Phönix and when they were trying to stop the Noctiluca. Even though assisting her comrades was her reason for being.

“If only I could’ve gotten it together back then, Theo would have

—”

“Kurena.” Shin’s somber tone cut her off.

As she looked back, she noticed he was grimacing, as if enduring an unseen agony.

“It’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault.”

The fact that Shana died. The fact that Shana had to fight.

Yeah...

“...Yeah. But I definitely didn’t have my act together.”

She couldn’t perform, and because of that, Theo, and Shana...even Shin... If only she had been better, things would have turned out differently. At least, that was how she felt.

Because if that wasn’t true, it meant that she couldn’t have saved anyone to begin with. And she desperately didn’t want that to be the case... The realization filled her mind like a chill running through her body.

If she was useless in battle...then that would mean she had no place standing beside the man facing her now.

“I’ll do it right next time. I’ll fight. I won’t fail again, so...”

“Kurena.”

“...don’t abandon me.”

The sunlight filtered through the curtains and into the hallway of the military hospital, casting a stripe of faint light onto the floor. Walking through the parquet corridor, Shin thought back to Kurena’s words.

*If only I could have gotten it together back then, Theo would have—
But I definitely didn’t have my act together.*

She’d tried to hide it, but her expression was that of an abandoned child on the verge of bursting into tears.

Shin couldn’t help feeling the same way. What if he hadn’t fallen off the Mirage Spire when he engaged the Phönix? If one were to ask who was to *blame* for what happened in that battle, he would say that responsibility rested solely with the squad captain. Lena and Ishmael would each insist that the blunder was on their end, but Shin couldn’t agree with that.

But while his heart wanted to shout out and admit it was all his fault, some sober part of his mind reasoned that he wasn’t really to blame. Regardless of whether he fell or not, the end result probably wouldn’t have been much different. Undertaker would have been just as helpless as everyone else in the face of the Noctiluca.

If he’d been there, the one thing that would have changed is that they wouldn’t have had to waste time figuring out the position of the control core, but the Stella Maris would have still needed to get closer and fire its main gun. That would have required taking out the

railguns, meaning a battle on the Noctiluca's deck would have been unavoidable.

But more than anything, Shin wouldn't have predicted the Noctiluca's final shot. Using Liquid Micromachines to revive the silenced barrel was something he couldn't have guessed. Either way, someone would have had to jump into the line of fire to prevent the Stella Maris from taking a hit.

And so the only difference was that he might have taken up that role instead. And thinking that his presence would have been the one thing to tip the scales...would have been arrogant of him, to say the least.

Standing in front of the hospital room number he'd been given, he saw a person leaning against the door. The figure had blond hair, which had been faded by the salt air of the ocean, and wore the Fleet Countries' indigo-navy uniform.

"Hey." He greeted Shin with a raised hand.

Shin simply nodded. Ishmael threw a glance at the door behind him.

"The Fleet Countries will take responsibility for the badly injured until they've healed enough to be transported. That includes the kid... He can't exactly move, but he's used to pain by now. He should be able to hear you, at any rate."

"Yeah... Look after him for us," Shin said, bowing his head deeply.

He could tell that Ishmael had nodded gravely in response. Watching his indigo-navy silhouette walk down the corridor, Shin opened the door to the hospital room.

The place was small, but still spacious. The windows were open just a crack, allowing a bit of the sea breeze to roll in. Theo was seated on the bed, looking outside. Hearing the creaking of the door, he turned toward it. Upon seeing Shin, the somewhat faraway, distant gaze in his jade-green eyes seemed to regain its focus, and he blinked once.

"Shin... Are you okay to walk already?"

"I think *I* should be the one asking you how *you* feel... But yes. I can move, if nothing else."

"Yeah? That's good to hear."

Despite being so injured that he wasn't allowed to check out of the hospital yet, Theo seemed relatively relaxed. Realizing that Shin was deliberately not returning the question, he carried on as if nothing had happened.

"For now, they're saying there's no risk of infection," Theo said.

His jade eyes had an emptiness to them that conveyed a sense of apathy. It was as if he wasn't looking at anything at all.

“It was a pretty clean cut, I guess. So it closed up really easily and doesn’t hurt that much anymore. It just feels weird, y’know? Something feels off even when I sit down, but it’s especially bad when I stand. It’s like my balance is off. Even though...”

He looked down at his left side, where his now-bandaged arm had been severed between the wrist and the elbow, and he flashed a feeble, self-deprecating grin.

“...I didn’t lose a whole lot. Just one little hand, heh.”

“...”

“Turns out arms are pretty heavy. You don’t really think about it when they’re attached, but our bodies weigh a few dozen kilos, and our arms count for around ten percent of that total weight. So yeah, it’s a lot.”

His jade eyes remained fixed on where his missing hand should have been.

“You know, once... Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, before I even met you, one of my squad mates had their whole arm blown off in battle. And I had to pick it up. I should have remembered how heavy an arm could be, because I had to pick one up once... But I forgot.”

He’d forgotten the weight because the past event had never fully registered for him. Or perhaps, he’d simply forgotten the ease with which one could suffer such a loss. Whether it was the loss of a hand or the loss of one’s will to fight, misfortune picked its victims indiscriminately.

“...And that squad mate of mine—he died after that. He was no longer able to fight, so he wasn’t given any treatment... He just bled out.”

That was what medical treatment in the Eighty-Sixth Sector amounted to. After all, the Eighty-Six weren’t seen as human. Light injuries were treated just so that anyone who could return to active duty did. But those who had suffered grave wounds and would require hospitalization were left unattended. Even in cases where proper medical treatment would have saved their lives. The Republic hated nothing more than wasting resources to mend broken tools.

“I...can’t fight anymore,” Theo said, staring fixedly at a wound so similar to the one suffered by an old comrade Shin never knew.

A wound that would have been disregarded. A wound that, outside the Eighty-Sixth Sector, had been treated as if it was a matter of course.

“But I don’t have to die. I was saved, and no one’s telling me to finish myself off, either... This really isn’t the Eighty-Sixth Sector. I’ve really left that battlefield behind. It took me this long to realize it, but now...it finally feels real.”

At long last, they had been freed from the prison where they’d

waited out their five-year sentence, having nothing to look forward to but the release of a warrior's death. No matter how much control over their fates they tried to grasp, the stage of their deaths had all but been decided—yet still, they made it out. The immutable fate of the Eighty-Six had been challenged and defeated.

“All that's left is for me to break the chains that bind me to that place.”

To free themselves from the burden...from the belief that the only path they could walk was one of pain and death. That was the final hurdle.

“...It's fine. I'll keep living, and I'll definitely find happiness. If I don't, I'd never be able to face the captain, not to mention everyone who died before us.”

“That's—”

“I know. It sounds like I'm cursing myself, right? But it's the only thing I can hold on to now.”

Fighting to the very end was the pride of the Eighty-Six. It was how they left their mark, their proof of existence. But this was no longer possible for Theo. So all he had left was...

“If I let this feeling shackle me, it really will become a curse. But if I only hold on to it until I find my own something...my own someone...like you did...then it'll be a dream. I'm sure the captain would grant me that much...because I think that he would have wanted me to be happy.”

“...Theo.” Shin parted his lips, unable to endure it any longer.

He knew that he probably should have just stood there and listened, but...it was too much.

“You don't have to strain yourself like this... You don't have to pretend everything's fine.”

Hearing this, Theo contorted his expression into a tearful smile. He knew Shin didn't come here for *this*.

“I know... Let me bluff, though. I've been leaning on you for so long... From now on...”

...don't let me rely on you any longer. Don't tell me I can depend on you.

“...I'm sorry. For having you be our Reaper... It must have been such a heavy burden to bear.”

To carry the names and hearts of all his fallen comrades until he reached his final destination. For Theo and everyone else who fought alongside Shin, this was precious salvation. But for Shin, who was relied upon by all his comrades, it was an indescribable burden.

“Thank you. For everything. And I'm sorry. Really.”

Shin reflexively made to deny his words, but he reconsidered for a moment and fell silent. He wanted to deny the existence of any

burden. But that wasn't true.

"Yeah... It was a lot to carry. It really was. From beginning to end."

Being relied upon, entrusted with all those feelings.

"And because of how heavy it was, I felt like I couldn't simply let myself die and throw it all away. I didn't break down along the way because so many people trusted me... I've been relying on you in the same way. Feeling like I could be that person for everyone made everything easier."

Being relied upon was what kept him going. He felt as if the comfort and relief he offered others was his own salvation. This sort of relationship was a difficult one to maintain. Each and every one of them was a heavy burden, because they were all that dear to him.

After a long silence, as if scrutinizing Shin's answer, Theo finally nodded.

"...I see." He nodded a second time, deeply and profoundly. "So even that was helpful for something. In that case..."

He looked up, his green eyes once again helpless and lost but ever so slightly relieved and bright.

"...then you'll be fine without me, right?"

"We won't be fine. But yeah...we'll manage."

"I think I can manage now, too. I'm...just the tiniest bit relieved. The pride of the Eighty-Six won't become my curse."

He didn't have to let the pride of the Eighty-Six guide him to a future where all that awaited him as a reward for his efforts was death. Instead, he would let the captain's prayer become his curse, so that the battlefield would not become his grave.

"For now, let's try our hardest... So that when the going gets tough, we can ask each other for support."

It wouldn't be a one-sided relationship, like they'd had until now, with only one of them relying on the other. This time, they'd be equals.

"Until that day comes, I hope I'll be able to say you can trust me during the hard times."

Leaving the military hospital, Shin knew he had to begin preparations for his return to duty as operations commander. And still, one way or another, he found himself wandering through the halls of the base, before stopping in front of the leviathan-skeleton model. When he first saw it as a child, it was as if he was admiring the bones of a mythical creature.

Over a decade had passed since that day, but even now, looking up at it made him feel like he was looking at a dragon's skeleton. Even

now, when he'd seen a true tyrant of the seas, large enough to make this skeleton seem like a baby by comparison.

Then you'll be fine without me, right?

"...Will we?"

He'd told Theo they'd manage, but honestly, he wasn't even sure that was true. He couldn't show that kind of weakness to Theo, so he said what he said, but he wasn't confident in the answer.

Because there was nothing he could do. The ending that Theo faced, the loss that he had suffered in his final battle, was one that Shin couldn't do anything about. There was no changing the past. Some things were beyond even Shin, and this was something he could do nothing about.

Not now, and not ever.

The dragon skeleton above him didn't answer, of course. Letting out a sigh, Shin turned around when he suddenly found Lena standing opposite him. Taken by surprise, he blinked a few times.

"...What's wrong?" he asked.

"What do you mean...? You were late, so I got worried," Lena replied.

She walked over to him with a strained smile, but her expression was clearly a facade. Lena had known Theo long enough. True, she'd only known him by his voice for much of it, but they'd still held a connection for several months. His leaving the line of battle weighed heavily on Lena, too.

"How was Theo...?"

"He's putting on a brave face... He said he'd be okay and that I shouldn't let him rely on me."

Theo said that, even though no one would fault him for lashing out. Shin had gone to see him to give him a chance to let out all those pent-up, unresolved emotions—but Theo wouldn't allow it.

"That's...what he said, hmm?" Lena said, standing next to him.

With her silver eyes, she followed Shin's gaze up to the skeleton specimen.

"I can't imagine the pain..."

She didn't specify who or what she meant. She was likely talking about both of them. The pain of Theo's loss... The pain of Shin's helplessness...

"...Yeah."

If not for the source of comfort and warmth at his side, he might have been unable to nod at these words. And once he acknowledged them, reality became too much to bear.

"I thought maybe...I could do something for him."

This was the sentiment of the Reaper...who put his loved ones above all else...

“If nothing else, I wanted to protect his heart. But when the time really came, I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t find a single word to comfort him. I tried to think, *What should I do? What could I do to help him...?*”

But nothing came to mind.

“...I’m sorry. I ended up venting to you.”

“Don’t be... That’s why I came.”

Lena looked up into his bloodred eyes, which were so unusually fragile. As if to silently affirm that he was safe with her.

You can’t save everyone. You can’t shoulder every single burden.

Shin probably knew this better than anyone. Theo’s choices and outcomes were his alone to bear. And Shin understood that, too. But still, he couldn’t help feeling that this should never have happened. That this outcome was one that filled him with sorrow. And those feelings weren’t mistaken.

The fact that he could openly confess his pain, and the fact that his own powerlessness was crushing him—this just served as proof of how much Theo meant to Shin. And that emotion could never be invalidated.

That was why expressing it wasn’t pitiful. She wouldn’t think any less of him for it.

“Depend on me. If you’re suffering, lean on me. I’ll support you. We can shoulder every burden together. Whenever you’re sad or in pain, I’ll...I’ll protect you.”

He was a kind person. A person pained by the misfortune of others. But that kindness wore him down. It ate away at him until he could no longer bear it.

“Shin, from now on, I’ll be by your side in those hard times. I’ll always be with you.

I’ll never leave you behind. I won’t make you sad. I’ll be the one person you can trust to never hurt you. And...

“I love you, too.

“I want to spend my life with you. I want to see the sea again, and this time, I want it to be with you. I want us to see the sea you spoke of, together.”

The unforgiving northern sea, glowing a soft blue. The southern sea in summer, its waters lit with myriad colors. The fireworks of the Revolution Festival. The autumn and winter sceneries of the Federacy, which Lena hadn’t experienced yet. Touring the United Kingdom and witnessing the northern lights, as they said they would. Viewing the Alliance’s picturesque scenery. The countless cities and countries they’d never visited, which lay beyond the Legion’s territories.

To visit the Eighty-Sixth Sector one more time and see its flowers bloom.

To see everything he'd wished to show her far beyond the battlefield.

"I want to see things I've never seen before with you. I want to admire your smile as you show them to me. I want to share all those emotions. All the joy, all the sorrow. Forever... If possible."

So you can tell me of the pain you're harboring now. So you can, one day, share with me the story behind that scar around your neck.

She ran both hands along his scar, standing on tiptoe to bring her lips to his. Despite her touching the scar he'd always hidden with his uniform's collar, Shin didn't reject her. Instead, he wrapped his hands around her waist with all the delicacy in the world and drew her in closer.

His lips, which he had bitten down on far too often, tasted faintly of blood. For a moment, she thought she detected the bitter taste of tears. The tears he had refused to shed in front of her. The tears he would not let anyone see. So as if to wipe them away, she kissed him.

Like the kiss of an oath, a promise made before God. Like the kiss of a prince, which was said to bring about miracles.

Hers was the oath's kiss, a promise made to the Reaper. Hers was the Bloodstained Queen's kiss, to bring forth a miracle.

"Let's go, together, beyond this battlefield. Let's outlast this bloody war. Let's see this through to the end. Together."

Until death did they part?

No. They would not wish for such finite happiness. The winds of war, upon which traveled death itself, were persistent and spiteful and would scatter so weak a wish all too easily.

No, not even death could keep them apart.

"I'll always wait for your return. I'll never leave you behind..."

It would be nothing short of a miracle to keep such a promise on this battlefield of certain death. But because this was a wish that they were determined to grant for each other, it became an oath.

"...so I need you to always return to my side."

No matter how tumultuous the battles ahead of them might be, he would have to escape the verge of death.

"I need you to come back to me. Safe and sound."

INTERLUDE

THE KING OF SPADES AND QUEEN OF HEARTS'S INTERMINABLE, ALL TOO TRIVIAL DISPUTE

<<Why are you here, Serpent? Hasn't your next operation begun?>>

"That's quite the greeting, Zelene."

Zelene had been returned to the Federacy. Sitting in her container within the laboratory, she posed her query to Vika, to which he replied with an indifferent shrug. He offered no real answer, simply regarding her with the thin, venomous smile of a snake.

"Isn't it about time you started talking to Nouzen the same way you speak to me? That's your true nature as a Legion unit, after all. Just a few days ago, you were laughing—and he still hadn't realized exactly how much strain that put on you..."

<<————>>

The Legion were killing machines and nothing more. And killing machines wouldn't normally need to be capable of human speech or emotion. Being a Shepherd, Zelene could remember those things, but the Legion weren't equipped with the means to replicate those functions.

In truth, even idle chatter put a strain on her that threatened to fry her Liquid Micromachine brain. And still, she didn't want to interact with Shin using her normal mechanical lexicon. In spite of everything, Shin tried to treat Zelene not as a Legion unit, but as a person. And she didn't want to meet Shin's emotions with behavior that proved she was nothing more than another mindless killing machine.

Because that fact would likely cause that sweet, troubled child

great pain.

<<...What do you require of me?>>

Vika shrugged again, electing not to pursue the topic further.

“You mentioned a ‘Morpho unit number four,’ which was to serve as the vanguard of the second large-scale offensive. We’ve encountered a model that corresponds to that description in the Fleet Countries. A unit for naval combat, equipped with a railgun. A battleship, or rather, an amphibious assault ship.”

For a moment, Zelene remained silent. She’d posited that mass-produced Morpho units could be under construction, but...a battleship? In the Fleet Countries?

<<Unknown. Beyond the bounds of this unit’s jurisdiction. Data regarding each area’s command bases and the construction of experimental prototype units is only known to the commander units of each combat area.>>

“That makes sense, yes. In order to keep confidential information under wraps, the information isn’t relayed to any unit except for the ones in charge of it.”

<<Moreover...it is baffling.>>

“I agree.”

The external camera reflected the faint glow in Vika’s Imperial violet eyes.

“What I wanted to confirm with you is that this battleship Legion’s control core had the neural networks of other people added to its Shepherd, as an external database. Even as a method of improving the Legion, this is indeed an unusual choice. They could have simply exchanged the old Shepherd for a new one.”

The Legion were killing machines. A unit’s central processor was nothing more than a component. There was no way that exchanging it, if need be, wasn’t an option.

“On top of that, there’s the High Mobility type. You said that it’d been developed as part of the research on artificial intelligence. And you also said...that we’d given it an interesting name.”

Phönix. The immortal bird that immolated its body when on the verge of death, only to be reborn from its own ashes.

“*Eternal life* is the Phönix’s primary feature. It was a product of research on the *immortalization of artificial intelligence*. The Legion can be mass-produced, but there are units that cannot be replaced. The purpose of the research was to find a way for those units to stay alive in perpetuity. In other words, this is a draft for the *immortalization of Shepherds*.”

And the fact that the Shepherds seek immortality over *substitution*... The fact that they insist on connecting new neural networks instead of replacing them altogether means...

“The current Shepherds are doggedly pursuing the preservation of their personalities or—if I’m allowed to be so uncharacteristically

poetic—their own survival, aren't they? It's almost as if they..."

...feared death—just like the frail, weak humans the Shepherds had been in life.

"Mass-producing the Phönix and bringing the Noctiluca into the fold. It makes no sense in the scope of reinforcing the Shepherds."

That was the consensus among the western front's officers following the Strike Package's report. As Major General Altner stated this, Willem—the chief of staff—and Grethe, who had returned to base to command the three-pronged operation, each nodded. They were all in the western front's integrated headquarters, in the chief of staff's room.

"Using the Phönix to gather the heads of commanders is one thing. But loading them onto an amphibious assault ship as infantry units? That kind of application makes no sense. Grauwolf would have been enough— No, Grauwolf would have actually been the better choice."

The Phönix focused on speed to the point where it discarded live weaponry and heavy armor, which was a fatal flaw from Richard's perspective. Modern warfare featured cannons with effective ranges as short as several dozen kilometers and as far as a hundred kilometers.

The Phönix, which only had melee weapons, was helpless in the face of an artillery barrage unless it crossed great distances under lethal fire. Its relative agility and optical camouflage were entirely meaningless when confronting the range and effective radius of high explosives.

Even when it had successfully drawn closer to the Strike Package and their Queen, they were capable of establishing effective countermeasures to defeating it. And as a matter of fact, it had repeatedly lost to Undertaker, which was optimized for melee combat but, unlike it, was a manned unit.

The Phönix didn't produce any results that should encourage the Legion to mass-produce it. And yet they still chose to do it.

"For starters, the Noctiluca is a strange concept in and of itself. They'd likely intended to introduce it against the Fleet Countries or in their fight against the United Kingdom. But the former wasn't an opponent they'd need the element of surprise to defeat. They could have just suffocated them with their existing forces until they died out."

As Grethe spoke, she rested her cheek against her hand and waved the other one dismissively. She didn't like the ruthlessness of this topic, but she wouldn't have reached the rank of colonel if she didn't realize that such unfeeling pragmatism was necessary at times.

“And the United Kingdom doesn’t make sense as an opponent, either. They’re a northern country, their climate is too cold, and their population is relatively small. Most of all, their terrain is full of cliffs that should be impossible for the Noctiluca to cross. All this would mean is that if the Legion brought the Noctiluca there, it’d only end up on battlefields where it wouldn’t be useful.”

“But the fact remains that it has a level of firepower we can’t ignore. It reeks of a diversion. We should probably assume they have some kind of angle. Still, as obvious of a decoy as it is, we have to handle it. Irritating though it may be,” Willem continued, clearly frustrated.

This was surprisingly candid coming from him. He hated nothing more than to have his emotions read, and he only ever showed this kind of honesty in the face of people like Richard and Grethe, who had known him for many years.

“I think the Legion’s true objective was in the Mirage Spire base,” Richard said. “There was no real reason to build it over the sea. Be it a production plant or a command post, they could have built it on land. As Prince Viktor aptly put, it’s a waste of resources. And that’s exactly why—”

“The Legion must have had *some reason that forced them to build a sea base*, you say... What do you think, Grethe?” Willem directed the conversation to her.

“We don’t have enough information to form a hypothesis, sir. Except... Well. I think they placed a significant amount of importance on making a base that was hard to find. We’re keeping a watchful eye over their land territories. But since they hadn’t developed any known naval units, coupled with the fact that there were no known Legion battles that took place underwater, we would have never thought to look for them out at sea.”

Richard regarded her words with a “hmm.” The reasoning checked out and matched the additional information they’d received from the Holy Theocracy during the expedition there—of the clearly unnatural trends among the Legion in their territory. The Legion’s behavior, and perhaps even their objective, seemed to be a perfect match.

It was as if they were trying to divert humanity’s attention away from something until the right time—perhaps from some kind of facility being constructed or its purpose.

“Willem, is it possible to analyze and accurately reproduce the Mirage Spire’s structure using the Reginleif’s mission recorder?” Grethe asked.

“It’s being worked on, but we don’t have enough image data to create a perfect reproduction,” he replied. “And since the Noctiluca

went the extra mile and destroyed its own damn base, we can't investigate it any further... Though, I think the fact that the Noctiluca decided to wreck the place lends credence to the idea that the Mirage Spire itself was the main goal here."

"So in the next operation, we'll have to try gaining the information from their base. And that's why you're finally doing what you've been avoiding all this time and organizing the old nobility's private armies into free army regiments."

During the Age of the Empire, each noble possessed a military force made up of their subordinates and blood relatives. When the Federacy came to be, the influential nobles retained their positions as the top brass. Meanwhile, the revolution had earned the middle class the right to join the military and expand their numbers and influence over the army.

Due to both of these groups' ulterior motives, the private armies that the high-ranking nobles retained for the sake of protecting their private property had never been organized into the Federacy's army—despite eleven years of war and countless casualties.

The fact that this private organization was being introduced meant that the Federacy's army was finally and truly losing its composure. Even though the nobles' elite unit, which had been incorporated within the Federacy's military, had yet to do anything of note.

"I'll say it for the record, but the Free Regiments aren't regarded favorably..." Grethe noted. "No matter how many commoner soldiers had to die, the nobles only cared for their power struggles. And so their soldiers learned to pursue merit by any means possible."

Despite her scathing remark, Willem—who was one such noble—didn't seem to mind.

"The commoners' complaints ring hollow. They're the ones who rejected organizing the private armies into the military because they didn't want the nobles to have any more martial influence."

That said, the real reason the private armies' introduction was put off was because they were waiting for the commoners' numbers to naturally decrease following their combat against the Legion. A *coldhearted reason*, Richard pondered, *and certainly not one that could be said aloud*. The nobles would watch over the Legion War unconcerned as most of the civilian soldiers died in the conflict. And then as the war naturally approached its conclusion, they would provide their private armies to the Federacy's military as strong, healthy forces, allowing the old nobility to seize control.

This was the nobles' true goal. They were preparing for conflict among the aristocracy, which would surely break out when the war intensified. During the final days of the Empire, the Imperial court had

splintered off into factions, with most people being none the wiser. The Imperial faction, which had the protection of the Imperial royal family as its declared purpose, had been reduced to a disorderly mob with the extinction of the Imperial line.

But there was one faction that sought to install itself as the new Imperial line. A faction that retained its power and influence even now and conspired to overturn the government.

“Archduchess Brantolote thinks herself the queen of the new Imperial line, and indeed, she doesn’t care if any of the commoners die. That’s why they sent out that regiment, Myrmecoleo.”

That was the regiment that had been dispatched to the Holy Theocracy with the Strike Package. Antlion—a monster with the head of a lion and the body of an ant. A pathetic *crossbreed of a creature* that could hunt its prey down but would never be able to digest it, inevitably starving to death.

...Indeed, a pitiful thing.

“Honestly, you nobles won’t let go of your ancient infighting even with the Empire in ruins.” As Richard squinted in self-deprecation and a hint of melancholy, Grethe’s voice cut into his thoughts. “The long-running antagonism and rivalry between the Onyxes and the Pyropes that’s been going on since the dawn of the Empire... The enemy unit in the Holy Theocracy is suspected to both help the Noctiluca with its repairs and be some kind of new model that’s somehow related to it. You don’t need to gain any information from the Noctiluca, so you’ll probably use that new weapon prototype to destroy it. You can’t let the Pyropes—the Myrmecoleo Regiment—get their hands on any crucial information, can you?”

Richard shrugged. Grethe was right, to an extent. The Noctiluca was of no use for collecting intelligence. Shin had confirmed that much. The Shepherd possessing it wasn’t an Imperial officer. It didn’t have the information they needed the most.

“The Pyropes have their own ulterior motives, just like we do. After all, the 1st Armored Division has Captain Nouzen. He’s under the protection of the temporary president, Ernst Zimmerman. And most importantly, he’s a Nouzen.”

Ernst served as president because he’d led the revolution and was backed by the citizens, but the revolution’s success couldn’t be attributed solely to him. He was a Jet—which was considered a subrace of the Aquila—and a serf. He was backed by the Onyx families, who, under the instructions of their leader, pushed for democracy. That faction included House Altner, Richard’s family; and Willem’s house, Ehrenfried.

And there was the greatest Onyx faction, which, after the war, would likely clash with House Brantolote and the Pyrope families

under it in their bid to coronate its archduchess.

The leader of that Onyx faction was House Nouzen.

The Empire's cursed sword, the black generals. Guardians of House Adel-Adler and offspring of the destroyers.

"They're the ones who don't want him to snatch away the credit for brilliantly sinking the Legion's most powerful unit to date. They wish to impede his and the Eighty-Six's ability to show the masses any more feats of heroism. This is what the Brantolotes' vixen and her new dynastic faction are trying to achieve."

CHAPTER 2

THE ASHEN BATTLEFIELD

Ash fell like snow.

Shin walked through the temporary hangar, putting on his gloves as the sound of the Noiryannarusean control officer's announcement boomed through the structure. His accent was odd; it had an intonation that made everything he said sound like a prayer.

The hangar was full of Reginleifs standing side by side. These were all the 1st Armored Division's units—or the advance battalion, as they were called in this operation. Their numbers had decreased in comparison to when the Strike Package had first been launched, and Stollenwurm and Alkonosts filled in for the missing manpower.

The Laughing Fox's Personal Mark was nowhere to be seen.

...Theo.

The thought crossed Shin's mind that he was probably being transferred to the Federacy's hospital right around now. He then shook his head lightly. A new operation was about to begin. This was no time to be distracted.

One characteristic of the Holy Theocracy's military facilities was that they were built to be completely isolated from the outside. A combination of outer walls and specially designed transparent shutters created an airtight seal around the temporary hangar Shin was in. Air was filtered in through vents.

Perhaps owing to that, this hangar lacked the usual scent of dust or the burning odor of metal, granting it the pure, clean atmosphere of a religious space. It didn't feel the slightest bit like a military installation. The walls, floors, and ceiling were made of pearl-gray materials that had a certain sheen to them.

Standing in the midst of this scenery was a large, black shadow. It

stood opposite the line of Reginleifs, its massive frame nearly brushing against the ceiling. Its gunmetal-colored plating was the shade of night, which beckoned all life into eternal slumber.

The Armée Furieuse. The Ghost Rider.

“Let us confirm the operation, then, Colonel Vladilena Milizé.”

Compared with the Federacy military’s unrefined design, the headquarters of the Holy Theocracy of Noiryannaruse’s 3rd Army Corps, Shiga Toura, looked like some kind of pagan sanctum sanctorum.

The length and width of the elliptical canopy was decorated by what looked to be silver leaf veins, with the ceiling itself being made of opaque glass. The floors and walls were polished like mirrors, painted a pearl-gray color that glinted like a splintered rainbow.

The interior of the glass hemisphere was composed of specially shaped holo-screens that displayed all sorts of footage. Glowing images were projected into thin air, producing touch-panel consoles. These were operated by hooded soldiers. This, coupled with their pearl-gray uniforms, gave the impression that they were monks.

The front half of the headquarters’ hemisphere had the operation map projected onto its holo-screen. As the commander of the 3rd Army Corps spoke, a spot on the map’s north quadrant, where the Legion’s territories were, began flickering.

“Our target lies within the blank sector. We are to destroy the new Legion unit that has advanced some seventy kilometers away from the front lines—the Offensive Factory type, designated Jiryal Cuckoo. The participating forces will be my 3rd Army Corps, Shiga Toura, and the 2nd Army Corps, I Thafaca. In addition, this time, we will be accompanied by the Federacy Expedition Brigade—the Strike Package’s 1st Armored Division and the two regiments that form the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment.”

The abstruse, gentle gravitas of this voice seemed to resound like the chiming of countless shards of glass clinking against one another. Its resonance echoed as if it were the soft patter of raindrops against clay. Lena couldn’t help but gaze back at the figure in confusion... In the two weeks since the 1st Armored Division had been dispatched to the Holy Theocracy, she couldn’t get used to this corps commander’s presence.

Feeling Lena’s gaze, the petite, delicate girl, with hair as golden as rays of sunlight, chuckled.

“It seems the commanders of the western nations have grown used to me by now, but when they first met me, they did gawk quite a bit. Seeing someone act so blatantly shocked is a pleasant surprise.”

She was the second holy general, Himmelnåde Rèze.

This girl was the corps commander of the Holy Theocracy's 3rd Army Corps, which Lena and the Strike Package were to cooperate with during this expedition.

Yes, *corps* commander.

Depending on the country, the definition of *corps* might change, but typically, it was a large unit made up of several divisions and included about a hundred thousand soldiers. Grethe led a brigade and a regiment, which were smaller than a division, but the fact that she'd been given this authority while she was still in her twenties was an exception that was only enabled by the ongoing war. A girl in her teens serving as a corps commander went beyond being exceptional. It was bizarre.

True, her rank wasn't as high as that of Vika, who commanded his motherland's ground forces—which was made up of several corps. But the United Kingdom was a despotic monarchy where kings held supreme authority over the military, and Vika was a prince. It was only natural that the king's child would be entrusted with some of his authorities.

"My apologies, Second General Rèze. I have heard that this isn't considered unusual here in the Holy Theocracy, but..."

"Please call me Hilnå. You're roughly the same age as my older sister, Colonel. I'd be happy if you could treat me as you might a younger sister."

Lena was unable to hide her confusion, to which Hilnå reacted with a pleasant, high-pitched giggle. Her fine, flowing blond hair was as faint as the rays of the spring sun. Her eyes were the pale, sweet golden shade of early evening. Her shoulders, delicate as the wings of a swan, and her dainty arms were hidden behind a white garb. She held a command baton that was taller than she was; it was a glass tube with bells applied to it, which chimed each time it moved.

With her lovely smile unchanging, she spoke in a tone that was utterly devoid of malice.

"It is human nature to favor *debauchery*, and humanity is often taught to remain worldly and lowly. As such, I cannot fault foreigners for not abiding by the rigid precepts of our sacred faith of Noirya. I especially do not expect understanding from the profligates of the Republic, who refuse to devote themselves to the duties of the earth goddess. We've known as much for three centuries and do not mind."

"..."

Before they departed, Grethe had warned her about this. She'd explained to her that the Holy Theocracy's ways of thinking would likely confuse her, and so she'd told her about them ahead of time. Thinking back on it, Lena sighed internally. Each time she spoke to

Hilnå or the Theocracy's staff officers, it struck her just how different their core values were.

The far-west countries—with the Holy Theocracy as their center—practiced a religion called Noirya. They regarded the earth goddess and the fates she governed over as the absolute deity. The faith posited that the goddess bestowed onto people the roles they must fulfill and the fates they must abide by. All souls were born into their families for the sake of fulfilling these roles.

Noirya was the national religion of the Holy Theocracy, and its doctrine was strictly adhered to, regarded even more highly than the laws of the nation. In this country, one could not choose their own profession, and one's household was seen as the most important factor in marriages. Individualism and freedom of choice simply did not exist.

A Theocracy military officer, who had been standing silently at attention by Hilnå's side so far, cleared his throat loudly. Hilnå's shoulders twitched, as if she'd just been chided.

"Ah... My apologies. Did I say something rude?"

Her golden eyes darted about nervously, like a scolded kitten. Yes, despite what she'd said, Hilnå didn't mean anything by it. Her way of thinking was just slightly, if fundamentally, unlike Lena's.

In addition, the Holy Theocracy's language was different from the common tongue used by the Republic and the Federacy. Hilnå, however, had been speaking in the common tongue ever since Lena and the Strike Package had been dispatched to the Holy Theocracy, so as to accommodate them. She spoke so naturally that Lena sometimes forgot this wasn't her first language.

"No, don't let it bother you... Also, Hilnå, please feel free to call me Lena."

Hilnå's expression lit up. In that regard, she was very much a young girl who was three years Lena's junior.

"Oh, thank you very much, sister Lena!"

The staff officer coughed dryly again. This time, Hilnå shrugged in an exaggerated fashion. The staff officer's eyes remained fixed forward, but his gaze had the gentle affection one might direct at a younger sister and the deep reverence one showed toward their darling princess. It struck Lena as heartwarming. This petite corps commander must be quite beloved by her subordinates.

"In that case, Hilnå, there's something I'd like to ask. How did you discover the Jiryal Cuckoo when it's seventy kilometers away from the front lines?"

"The oracles in the forecast division detected it," Hilnå replied.

Noticing the confusion in Lena's eyes, the staff officer appended:

"Oracles are what we call those graced with the Heliodor's psychic

ability, Colonel. Perhaps, it could be best described as the ability to preemptively detect threats that approach oneself and one's kin and comrades. Unlike the Pyropes' clairvoyance and the Sapphira's future sight, they cannot tangibly observe the threat, but in exchange, the effective radius of their detection is much wider. The oracle officers of our generation can detect the entire area around the far west's friendly nations.

"The oracles are believed to be one major reason that our Holy Theocracy and the neighboring countries have managed to hold on to their land. It is said that in ancient times, long before the Holy Theocracy was established, there was an oracle whose range of detection spanned over a hundred thousand kilometers."

It reminded Lena of Shin, whose ability was able to span the entirety of the Republic and the Federacy's western front... Though a hundred thousand kilometers felt like an exaggerated figure.

Hilnå continued:

"As the staff officer here said, the oracles don't have a tangible vision of the threats they perceive. We sent scouts deep into Legion territory, and that is how we discovered that behemoth, the Jiryal Cuckoo."

"Based on the Holy Theocracy's preliminary observations, the Halcyon is estimated to be an improved version of the Weisel. Fortunately, this also means it inherited the Weisel's slow movement speed of a few kilometers per hour."

Unlike the Federacy, the Republic, the Alliance, and the United Kingdom, which shared the same common language with different dialects, the Holy Theocracy and the far-western countries' language gave its speakers a unique accent. As such, Shin and the Federacy officers struggled to pronounce their words.

To that end, when the Federacy military communicated among themselves, they used a different designation for the Offensive Factory type: *Halcyon*. Like the Holy Theocracy, it was based off the image of the bird of the underworld.

Halcyon. A legendary bird said to live in the northern seas.

Looking ahead, Frederica stepped forward and furrowed her brow.

"...Even so, this is quite bothersome. In short, this means that the Halcyon has combined with the Noctiluca. I believe we could very much continue referring to it as the Noctiluca all the same."

"That's just a theory, given the circumstances. We can't verify that until we destroy and subsequently investigate it."

Though in truth, Shin's ability had pretty much confirmed that this was the case. Soon after arriving at the Holy Theocracy, he'd

sensed the Noctiluca, and it didn't take long for him to conclude that he'd heard its voice coming from what the Holy Theocracy's military described as the Jiryal Cuckoo.

But on a surface level, they had to pretend it was nothing more than a hypothesis. They couldn't disclose even the Para-RAID's existence to the Holy Theocracy, and they'd been strictly ordered to only use the radio to communicate and to keep the existence of the RAID Device under wraps.

"Right you are... Then since this Legion could be the Noctiluca, why is it not shooting at us despite us being in its effective range?"

"It's just barely outside the effective range, so it probably intends on bombarding the front lines and the back of the rear lines at once. We've predicted that much. With that size, it's unlikely that it'd be able to fire and move at the same time."

As wide as the enemy's firing range was, its movement speed was exceptionally slow. It had to stop moving whenever it attacked, so its most optimal tactic would be to get as close as it could before it was fired at and sweep through the entirety of the enemy lines all at once.

With that said, Shin narrowed his eyes. It made perfect sense that the Theocracy would be in a panic.

"With the range of a Morpho or a Noctiluca, depending on where the enemy fires from, it could easily bombard the entirety of the Theocracy's territory. At worst, this one Legion unit could end up decimating the entire nation."

"So, um, our mission is to trash the Halcyon before it can get to its predicted firing position, right?"

Rito was leading the 2nd Battalion in Yuuto's place, and Michihi had taken command over the 3rd Battalion. They were positioned fifteen kilometers ahead of the Armée Furieuse, close to the front lines.

They were in a camouflaged supply depot for ammunition and fuel. Even the prefab camouflaged storehouses were colored pearl-gray. A Theocracy interpreter had informed them that since these warehouses were only lightly airtight, they'd be better off sitting in their Feldreß. And so they'd boarded their units' cockpits. Rito spoke as he called up the operation map onto his optical screen.

He sensed Michihi's sarcastic smile through the Para-RAID and the radio, which were working in tandem.

"I'd say that's skipping a whole lot of steps, Rito. You make it sound like we're all just going to charge it."

"I know, I know. First, the Theocracy's military is going to launch an attack on the Legion directly in order to keep them pinned down.

Meanwhile, Cap'n Nouzen's advance battalion and those of us at the main force lie low, right? The Theocracy's people are pretty strong. They're totally fine with handling the diversion all on their own."

Even from the perspective of a former child soldier like Rito, the Theocracy's military came across as thorough, disciplined, and powerful. Their facilities and equipment were far more depleted in comparison to those of a large country like the Federacy, but their spirits were high, and both the units deployed on the front lines and the soldiers guarding the home front stood prepared.

It felt like they were worshipping the corps commander, though. They carried portraits of her, and they would pray to her image at every turn or chant her name. Flags depicting her were flapping around them, and the faceless soldiers' chants could be heard everywhere. The religious fervor of the whole scene was off-putting, but above all else...

"...*That's* easily the creepiest part."

Rito quickly directed his gaze at the soldiers. The Theocracy soldiers walking outside the hangar were covered from head to toe in pearl-gray flight suits that completely covered their bodies, and they also wore masks and goggles that hid their faces from view. They piloted some oddly shaped Feldreß that were the same pearl-gray color as their uniforms.

The scene was like a row of resplendent horses, ridden by faceless cavaliers amid the ashen snow.

"I know what you mean, but they have no choice. The Theocracy's battlefield... The blank sector is full of ash."

The Severed Head peninsula, located at the end of the northwestern tip of the continent. Or as it was otherwise known—the blank sector. A wasteland shut off by volcanic ash that had rained upon it for several centuries. The volcano located at the center of the peninsula had become active, billowing large amounts of smoke and volcanic ash and rendering the land inhospitable to human life.

With entire countries of people and wildlife fleeing the area, the strip of land had been abandoned for hundreds of years. At present, the sun had been blocked off by the ash and smoke clouding the skies, and the surface had been covered by a thick layer of ash. The heavy metals scooped up with the magma had polluted the waters, creating a true no-man's-land.

The bulk of the Legion offensive facing the Theocracy made the blank sector their primary sphere of influence. As such, the Theocracy's battlefield was centered around this volcanic region.

This was the reason behind the Theocracy's strange uniforms and unique Feldreß design.

The volcanic ash was the result of molten magma bursting from

below the ground and up to the surface as solid particulates. They were essentially tiny shards of natural glass. Their edges were razor-sharp and easily capable of damaging the skin and eyeballs. Breathing them in for prolonged periods of time could cause serious damage to the lungs. Put simply, this was not a battlefield one could survive on with any part of their body needlessly exposed.

As such, the Theocracy's soldiers all wore environmental suits, without exception, whenever they walked outside the hangars. That said, their military had no rank that corresponded to infantry soldiers. Rather than being attended by infantry, the Theocracy's Feldreß instead used small, mobile extension units for covering fire on the battlefield.

Rito could hear Michihi giggle.

"But you got along with the pilots, didn't you, Rito?"

"Well, yeah. I can't understand what they're saying, but playing with them was pretty fun."

Said pilots were child soldiers, roughly the same age as the Processors. They were quite curious at the sight of the first foreigners they'd seen for as long as they could remember. Whenever they had the time, they came over to the Strike Package's barracks to hang out. They would exchange sweets, play card games, or simply compete at the military's favorite pastime, push-ups.

At the end of the day, they'd play chicken with cups of tea, hoping not to get the one with chili sauce and the Theocracy's special spices mixed into it. At least they did until Shin and someone who looked like a senior Theocracy officer stepped in to scold them.

Incidentally, that was when they showed Rito the corps commander's portrait. A Citrine girl with bright blond hair and golden eyes. They held these portraits up like precious treasures, as if presenting the image of some kind of fairy princess.

"Rema refoa, Himmelnåde. Tsuriji yuuna, Rèze." It roughly means, "We honor you, Lady Himmelnåde. Rèze, our guiding star..."

The staff officer who had attended their briefing gave him the meaning behind those words. This officer understood the Federacy's language, and when he recited the words, he placed a hand over his pearl-gray uniform's breast pocket. There was probably a locket or something of the sort in it that contained her portrait, because he looked like a devout believer when he performed the gesture.

It was the very picture of worship; of zealotry; of...faith.

The Eighty-Six, who believed in neither God nor heaven, knew no one who had ever acted in such a way.

Outside the hangar, where the Reginleifs stood at the ready, Rito could hear the same chanting from all around the blank sector's battlefield of ashen snow. This was what informed him that the

operation had begun. The Theocracy's faceless soldiers raised their voices in praise of their warrior princess.

Rema refoa, Himmelnåde!

Tsuriji yuuna, Rèze!

So began the operation's first stage. The Theocracy military corps launched their attack, acting as a diversion.

As if to answer the jubilant chanting over the communications lines, Hilnå held up her command baton in one hand, shaking the top of its pearl-like head so as to jingle its bells. The glass bells chimed clearly and coldly.

"For the fate of the land and the pride of its people, Shiga Toura, march! The battle upon this land is *our* war. I pray you play your roles to perfection!"

Hilnå's orders were crystal clear and traveled far, sweetly resounding across the ashen battlefield. But the next moment, the delicate echoes of her glittering, silica sand-like voice were replaced by the roars and battle cries of the soldiers.

The sight of it overwhelmed Lena. She'd never commanded an army this large.

"This is...amazing," she said, marveling.

Hilnå was younger than Lena, but her leadership and command skills were overwhelming. Their reaction could only be described as fervent devotion—fanaticism, even. Hilnå's gaze remained fixed on the front screen, and she didn't spare a glance in Lena's direction. Displayed on that screen was the unit emblem of her 3rd Army Corps, Shiga Toura: a swift, dapple-gray horse.

"All my corps's children have had their parents and brethren slain by the Legion," Hilnå said.

Lena widened her eyes in shock. Those born into the Theocracy had their professions decided by what family they were in. Soldiers were born into families of soldiers, which meant that all the soldiers who had perished in the last eleven years were the relatives of the soldiers standing upon it now.

The five divisions that made up this corps all looked up to the wavering symbol, pursing their crimson lips as if holding back tears.

"I am no different."

This fifteen-year-old corps commander was part of a warrior family.

"I lost my own family to the Legion. House Rèze is a family of saints with a substantial amount of political influence. To honor that role, when the war broke out eleven years ago, those of House Rèze took to the battlefield as generals. And they all died. All of them...

except for me.”

Saint was a title given to the highest clergy of the Noirya faith. Within the Theocracy, the clergy was seen as government officials, as well as military commanders.

But even if Hilnå was too young to stand on the battlefield during the outbreak of the war, the thought of her entire family dying... The fighting must have been fierce.

Hilnå’s eyes, gold as the setting sun, filled with a stern light for a moment. But when she turned back, her pale features had regained the gentle smile from before.

“It is because they know that everyone adores me so. We have lost our families, after all... All of us did.”

The Juggernauts stood near the Armée Furieuse in launch order. Piloting Wehrwolf, Raiden stood next to Shin in standby mode and activated the intercom with one hand. Shin turned to look in his direction.

“Shin, the Theocracy’s 2nd and 3rd Army Corps have moved in for the diversion. It’s underway right now. We should launch shortly, too, to remain on schedule.”

“Roger that. Frederica, get ready to move as well.”

As he looked to her with his bloodred eyes and spoke in a serene voice, Frederica nodded proudly. In this operation, Frederica wouldn’t remain in the command center with Lena but would join the battle as *observation personnel*, making use of her ability. She’d been deployed with the main force of the brigade in the back of the front lines, like Rito and Michihi, where she worked alongside the artillery battalion.

“While the Theocracy’s diversion unit draws the Legion away, your vanguard battalion will advance into the back of the front lines and hold the Halcyon’s operation range in check. As you do so, we at the main force will pass through the gap created by the diversion and advance sixty kilometers into Legion territory to destroy the Halcyon...correct? As you can see, I have a firm grasp of the situation. You can count on me.”

Shin nodded. But suddenly, Frederica looked up at him, the smile gone from her lips.

“Have you gathered the resolve to make use of me, Shinei?”

She wasn’t referring to her role as an observation aide in this operation. She meant using her authority as the Empire’s last empress to permanently shut down the Legion.

“...Honestly, I’d rather not,” Shin said with a sigh.

He was an Eighty-Six, and he took pride in fighting to his last breath. Placing the fate of humanity squarely on a young girl’s shoulders and sacrificing one child to end the war... Her kindness was something he could not accept...

But because of this insistence, one of his comrades could no longer fight on. As bitter as he was to admit that, he didn't avert his gaze from the cruel reality that hung in the balance.

"But I want Theo's sacrifice to be the last. I couldn't do anything for him, but I can do something about *this*... I can't afford not to."

It wasn't just for his fellow Eighty-Six or his comrades from the Strike Package. It was so the lives of countless soldiers across all the battlefields where the Legion were being fought wouldn't have to be lost.

Frederica kept looking up at him and earnestly put her thoughts to words. So that he wouldn't have to bear the burden of this decision on his own.

"I told you, didn't I? Even I will not remain a child forever. Raiden and Vladilena have asked this of you, and so shall I. Relying on me, as you would rely on them, is the same as asking a comrade in battle for support... You need not feel reluctant to do so."

"I won't put it into action until preparations have been made. The fact that I'm not willing to sacrifice you isn't going to change."

"I am cursed to ever be in the company of an overprotective brother, it seems... But so be it. You would never allow yourself to act in the same manner as the Republic."

She spoke with a hint of a wry smile, and then, as if having realized something, she appended:

"...However, with regard to that troublesome trump card they've drummed up this time. As overprotective as you may be, I must ask that you do not place me in that sort of thing ever again."

"Yeah..."

The Halcyon's design drew inspiration both from the Weisel and the Noctiluca—and it was appropriately humongous. A Reginleif's 88 mm turret couldn't hope to deal any significant damage to it. Even a Vánagandr's 120 mm turret or a Barushka Matushka's 125 mm one lacked the firepower to destroy it.

And that was why this new weapon was introduced. This was why they needed observation personnel. Because this new weapon was...

"...It's just one life-threatening gamble after another with them, isn't it?" Frederica asked coldly.

"The fact that they have some kind of countermeasure prepared this time is an improvement, though," Shin replied.

Suddenly, a voice cut into their exchange.

"I'm sure that those who lack a weapon on the sheer scale and majesty of our black swan would speak out in jealousy. This is why I find lowly commoners to be so disagreeable. Much as the hackneyed anecdote of the fox crying sour grapes goes, the masses eye the aristocracy with petty envy."

“...Excuse you?” Frederica raised her eyebrows.
Though the better question to ask was...
...*Who is this?*

Shin was taken aback by the condescending voice that had butted into their conversation. It was, far and away, not the kind of voice one might expect to hear in a military base.

“For starters, the fact that those brittle skeletons are the main force here instead of my older brother’s wonderful Vánagandr is *upsurd!* You should gaze upon this unit and know the true majesty of a proud knight!”

It was the high-pitched voice...of a young girl. Frederica unconsciously shifted her gaze over to the speaker, whose tuft of hair had just reached her field of vision. Looking farther down, she was met with a pair of golden eyes staring back at her.

It was a child, roughly ten years of age. Her crimson, almost rose-colored hair was coiled into two pigtails that hung down from her head like a pair of dog ears. Despite being on the front lines, she wore a scarlet silk dress and had a tiara inlaid with red gemstones.

She was, in the simplest terms, a very *red* girl.

Shin wasn’t familiar with her, but he’d grown used to seeing such things on this expedition; she was a Mascot. In order to ensure the Halcyon’s destruction and to gather necessary intelligence, Shin’s 1st Armored Division was joined by another unit from the Federacy.

Shin himself had entered the battlefield at about the same age as this girl was now, and he’d grown used to seeing Frederica here, too. But between the Federacy military’s Mascots, the United Kingdom’s Sirins, and the Theocracy’s young corps commander, the sight of young girls on the battlefield was becoming an all too common one. Though it had taken him longer than most people to come to this realization, the situation was no less apparent.

“Don’t you mean *absurd?*” Frederica asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“Ah...!” The Mascot girl raised her voice in a surprisingly frank gesture of surprise.

Frederica burst into laughter rather unreservedly (likely as a means of getting back at the girl for her comment), and the girl glared at her, the corners of her eyes rising up indignantly.



“How dare you?! You brazen barbarian!”

“Excuse me?! If anyone here is brazen, I daresay it would be you!”
Shin let out a weary sigh.

She'd chided Rito about this, but Michihi herself found the Theocracy to be a bit eerie. Faceless soldiers clad in shining pearl-gray, unfamiliar Feldreß accompanied by countless small drones... But strangest of all was the way the Theocracy military conducted themselves. They were solemn, full of piety. Rather than seeming ruthless, they looked like they were marching on a pilgrimage.

Something about it struck Michihi as helpless and flimsy. Maybe it was because the Eighty-Six didn't believe in God or heaven.

The intercom crackled to life, and she heard a voice that didn't reach her through the Sensory Resonance.

“Are you nervous, miss? Not to worry, the Myrmecoleo Regiment will equally protect the weak Theocracy's people as well as you helpless children of the Strike Package.”

The voice's velvety caress carried the unpleasantly smooth intonation unique to old Giadian nobility. The Giadian Empire had been a nation with more nobles and princes than any other on the continent, and apparently, there were multiple noble dialects.

This particular dialect was different from the one used by Richard, who was technically Michihi's adoptive parent, and that of the chief of staff, Willem. It was unfamiliar, which perhaps made it more unpleasant to the ear.

Michihi sighed quietly, in a manner that wouldn't be picked up by this young man. She could tell that he was trying to be considerate of her in his own way. She glanced around, finding that aside from the white form of her Reginleif, Hualien, there was one more unit inside the hangar. It stood on eight powerful legs, its imposing frame covered with thick composite armor. It was equipped with two heavy machine guns and a 120 mm smoothbore gun capable of taking down even a Löwe or a Dinosauria.

Its coating wasn't the steel-colored plating of the Federacy, but rather, a vivid cinnabar color.

This was the Federacy's primary Feldreß—the M4A3 Vánagandr. A unit affiliated with the force that had been dispatched with them on this operation.

“The Myrmecoleo Free Armored Regiment...right?”

She wasn't very curious about them, but Grethe did explain the circumstances ahead of time. They were once a private army under the command of a major noble, and now they had been integrated

into the Federacy army. The cinnabar plating had been applied not only to their Vánagandr, but also to the Úlfhéðnar—the exoskeletons worn by the armored infantry who served as their consorts.

Indeed, nobles seemed to have a tendency for theatrical pretense. This plating was a showy, vivid color that wouldn't serve to camouflage their units in either the ashen battlefield of the Theocracy or the urban and forested terrains of the Federacy's western front.

In fact, there was likely no battlefield at all where such a gaudy color would do anything but make these units stand out. Modern warfare was ruled by rationality. There was no place for anything as anachronistic as knights sauntering about in shiny armor.

The red armor keenly reflected the hangar's faint light like a mirror. This was because the armor was completely untarnished. Perhaps, the coating had been reapplied and polished for its first true battle. It was a stark contrast to the Reginleif, which bore countless scars and scratches from its endless battles without so much as caring about it.

This Vánagandr was untouched because it had never known battle.

"I realize you spoke out of kindness, but I don't need a rookie on his first battle to treat me like a child... I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't patronize me, please and thanks."

The five divisions of the Theocracy's 3rd Army Corps each launched and entered combat. Heaving a sigh, Hilnå looked up at Lena and cocked her head inquisitively.

"How would you describe the people of the Free Armored Regiment? I haven't gotten much of a chance to speak with them..."

Had she spoken with the Eighty-Six, then? Lena wondered. The Expedition Brigade was given a separate barracks from the Theocracy military's.

"The Eighty-Six were quite friendly when they greeted me in the hangar, the meeting rooms, or the corridors. We've played a bit, too," Hilnå said.

So she had spoken with them.

Hilnå beamed as she boasted of her skill at the card-matching game.

"I'd heard they were elites who made the battlefield their home, but I was pleasantly surprised by their friendly demeanor. It seems the Eighty-Six get along quite well among themselves, too."

"They are comrades who survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield, after all." Lena smiled as she replied, a hint of pride in her voice. "But regarding your question... I'm sorry, but I'm a Republic

officer. I'm not privy to matters pertaining to the Federacy military."

A few of the staff officers urged Marcel to answer in her place, and he parted his lips to explain.

"They were originally the remains of the regiments that were set up to defend the territory of the old nobles..." Marcel's gaze darted about, as if seeking refuge from the curious look in Hilnå's large, clear, golden eyes. "Back in the days of the Empire, governors had their own regiments. When the Empire fell, most of them were integrated into the Federacy's military, but some of the more influential nobles kept a few of those regiments as private armies. Most of them are made up of young nobles or the children of family branches that draw blood from those noble houses."

In the Empire, the nobility had been those of the warrior class. Conscription wasn't the duty of the commoners but a privilege afforded only to the ruling class.

"So the Myrmecoleo people are most likely the children of former nobles. Their lord is House Brantolote, a powerful Pyrope family, so I'd guess they're probably young Pyrope nobles."

"I see..." Lena said pensively.

"Oh, is that so...?!" Hilnå reacted excitedly.

They both nodded, impressed with the fluid explanation. Indeed, the Myrmecoleo regimental commander and officers they'd seen in the briefing were all handsome and refined, as one might expect of young nobles. However, Marcel, who had offered the explanation, wore a rather dissatisfied expression.

"But... About that... They..."

Restlessly running through the pearl-gray temporary hangar was a small girl from the Theocracy. She was a six- to seven-year-old girl— young even by the standards of Bernholdt and the Vargus soldiers, who were used to seeing Mascots.

She carried on her a staff with an incense burner chiseled out of what looked like crystal pillars. Brandishing it over the Theocracy soldiers' heads, she chanted some kind of prayer before the soldiers sortied. She then ran over to Bernholdt and his men. The incense burner at the tip of her staff swung about as she moved, so the Vargus had to duck their heads every now and then. A young Theocracy military interpreter hurried over to them, wearing a nervous expression.

"My deepest apologies, noncommissioned Federacy officer. It is customary in our country to receive these blessings before we depart to battle. I hope you did not find it unpleasant—"

"Ah, no, it's all good. Thank you, miss."

The girl couldn't understand the Federacy's language, so she timidly looked between the interpreter and Bernholdt. Bernholdt instead squatted down and spoke with her at eye level. Realizing he was thanking her, her eyes lit up, and she beamed back at him.

It was then that Bernholdt noticed a group clad in striking colors pass through the corridor connecting to the hangar. The Myrmecoleo Regiment.

"How about it?" he called out to them. "They could bless you before your first battle."

But they didn't so much as spare a glance in his direction, much less say anything. They simply passed by, their physiques as well-bred and developed as one might expect of a model officer. But the way they walked past Bernholdt and his fellow Vargus gave the impression that they were ignoring them as if they were stray dogs.

The Vargus soldiers scoffed.

"We're used to them already. They've been that way ever since they were deployed here. Creepy guys, though."

"Well, that's nobles for you. Governors never treat anyone else with basic human decency."

It wasn't so much that they regarded the people of the combat territories like beasts, as the people of the Empire had done. It was more that Imperial nobles didn't see *anyone* other than their fellow nobles as human. Be they former subjects of the Empire or animals, they were equally unworthy to even be looked upon by a noble, much less spoken to.

Because they treated everyone equally poorly to an extent, Bernholdt knew better than to take particular offense. Thankfully, the girl didn't seem overly offended, either, instead running over to the Scythe squadron's Processors to offer them a blessing.

"I don't get it, though. Back when we served nobles, they always gave us a keg of ale whenever we got married, had a kid, or when one of our fathers died in battle," one of the Vargus soldiers said.

"Yeah, 'cause we served an Onyx warrior," Bernholdt said.

"Oh... Well, that's probably it, then."

Bernholdt and his fellow Vargus were born into an Onyx noble's territory. Since they were once an Onyx's soldiers, the Pyrope nobles' children saw them as even more of an eyesore. The Pyrope officers continued to walk away silently, not turning their scarlet heads or sparing them a crimson glance.

The officer leading them was the very image of a noble female knight, her golden hair tightly done up into braids. The young male officers following her had perfectly combed hair and meticulously manicured fingernails, and they wore flight suits that fit their bodies perfectly.

They were shining examples of what one might expect nobles to look like.

But it was then that Bernholdt suddenly turned around.

Wait...

Something was off. These Pyropes had crimson hair *or* eyes. And they were led by a *golden-haired* officer.

“...Hmm.”

The two girls’ high-pitched squabbling dragged on, much to Shin’s distress.

“To begin with, *your* black swan? Whatever do you mean by that? That bird, the Trauerschwan, was developed by the research institute and entrusted to the Strike Package! Do not appropriate it as your own, you insolent girl.”

“But it was the brave soldiers of our Myrmecoleo Regiment who were entrusted with ferrying it to the Theocracy! You crude Eighty-Six could not handle transporting such a delicate weapon!”

“That much I will grant you, because acting as pack mules is the one job that fits your sluggish Vánagandrs.”

“Y-you say that when your cowardly Reginleifs are only good for skittering about...! And how dare you profess to be a Mascot, a goddess of victory, when you wear such a stuffy uniform!”

“I suppose a girl who views the battlefield as some sort of ballroom would say that. What do you hope to achieve with that gaudy, impractical dress of yours? Do you mean to entrance the Legion with song and dance?”

Deciding he had nothing to do with the current situation, Raiden hunkered down in Wehrwolf’s cockpit, while Shin remained caught in the cross fire of the two girls’ bickering. To be specific, Frederica had grabbed onto the sleeve of his flight suit, preventing his escape.

“Enough! This is shameful!” The girl in the dress stomped in frustration, her high heels clicking against the floor. “Hiding behind your brother’s back like, are you? Coward!”

“Green with envy, are you? Useless lout!”

“Y-you...you...washboard!”

“Pint-size pygmy!”

Shin couldn’t put up with it any longer.

“Cut it out. You’re being immature,” he said to Frederica.

“And this isn’t very ladylike of you, Princess,” another voice cut into the argument.

Both girls instantly clammed up. But even though they had gone quiet, they still glared at each other with visible enmity, like two kittens on the verge of hissing. Shin turned to face the person who had

stopped the other girl.

This was a familiar voice, in fact. He'd met them before dispatching here and had seen them a few times in the Theocracy during meetings and joint training sessions.

"I apologize if our Mascot said anything rude, Captain. You too, little Mascot."

The man had the slender physique and refined features characteristic of the Empire's old nobility. His armored flight suit was identical in design to the Federacy military standard, but it had cinnabar colors applied to it. His unit medal was the symbol of a grotesque monster that was a cross between a lion and a gigantic ant.

The commander of the former Brantolote archduchess's Free Armored Regiment—

"...Major Günter."

"As I've told you countless times before, you may call me Gilwiese..." the man said, approaching him with his shoulders dropped.

He looked to be as young as twenty years old. He had bright, scarlet hair and the crimson eyes of a Pyrope, just like Frederica and Shin. The girl turned around and ran over to Gilwiese in tears. He was far taller than she was, and he had to squat down to accept her embrace.

"Ah, Brother! This is unacceptable! We cannot let these vulgar Eighty-Six savages be the main force! Can we not reconsider?!"

"Again with this...?" he said, contorting his pleasant, handsome face into his best look of admonishment. "That's beyond rude, Princess. It's your first time meeting the captain and the Strike Package's Mascot, isn't it? You should give them a proper greeting."

The girl he called "Princess" puffed up her cheeks in a pout, but he didn't relent. Eventually, she pinched up the hem of her dress in a sullen curtsy.

"...The Myrmecoleo Free Regiment's Goddess of Victory, Svenja Brantolote. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Captain Shinei Nouzen, and his cheeky sycophant."

She said Shin's last name, *Nouzen*, with an odd sort of accent. House Brantolote were the masters of the Myrmecoleo Regiment and a Pyrope family that opposed House Nouzen, which was the pillar of the Onyx families in the Gadian Empire.

Frederica parted her lips to retort against this blatant provocation, but Shin silenced her by pulling her soldier's cap down under her nose.

You'll just complicate things. Keep quiet.

Incidentally...

"...I thought your people were stationed at the Expedition

Brigade's headquarters. Shouldn't you be on the front lines with Second Lieutenant Michihi, Major?" Shin asked.

"Well, you see..." Gilwiese averted his gaze, awkwardly scratching his temple with a perfectly cut fingernail. "Ashamed as I am to admit it, the little princess here overslept. Pre-battle nerves kept her up."

"Brother!" Svenja shouted, her cheeks red.

"And though waiting for a lady to finish dressing up is a knight's duty, I couldn't possibly prioritize that over an operation. So I left my vice commander to handle the main force and told him to go on ahead. It shouldn't take long to catch up to a platoon of Vánagandr, so I'll regroup with them before it's time to begin in earnest... And besides, I did want to exchange a few words with you before the operation starts, Captain Nouzen."

Shin gazed fixedly at Gilwiese, who simply shrugged.

"The Reaper who leads the Eighty-Six, the mixed-blood Nouzen. I've always wondered what goes through your mind as you fight. *Could he be the same as us?* I thought."

"...?"

It was then that Shin noticed. He had received the black Onyx hair from his father, but his brother, Rei, got their mother's crimson Pyrope hair. Gilwiese's red hair was a different shade compared with his brother's and his mother's, however. Having Svenja and her crimson hair, which was the natural shade for a Pyrope, to reference made clear the artificiality of Gilwiese's particular shade of red.

His hair was dyed. And Svenja's eyes were golden—likely the mark of one mixed with Heliodor blood. Shin hadn't paid it much mind until now, but looking back, he'd gotten the impression that all the Myrmecoleo Regiment's officers were Pyropes mixed with some other bloodline.

Imperial nobles abhorred the mixing of bloodlines. And in the ten years since the Empire became the Federacy, those values hadn't faded away.

That explains it, Shin thought bitterly.

Their unit's symbol was an antlion. A monster with a lion's head and an ant's body. Two separate species mixed into one. A unit made up by those noble children who, while drawing on the blood of the aristocracy, could not be fully accepted into it because of their mixed heritage.

"But I suppose I was wrong. Marquis Nouzen is a kind grandfather to you, is he not? Except... If that's the case, why are you fighting?"

"..."

Shin heaved a brief sigh... Eugene had asked him the same question once upon a time.

"...Major Günter, the operation's already underway. We don't

have much time to—”

Gilwiese regarded him with an awkward smile.

“Yes, that’s why that’s all I want to ask you... I’d appreciate it if you could answer.”

He wanted Shin, who was a child of mixed Imperial blood and, at the same time, who wasn’t being used as a pawn by the noble houses, to answer that question.

“...It’s because of the war.”

It’d taken away his family and so many of his brothers and sisters in arms. The Eighty-Sixth Sector deprived him of his future and freedom. It was sheer catastrophe. Just like the metallic maelstrom of violence that severed part of Theo’s arm and a portion of his future along with it.

“I want to end it. Though it might seem strange to you, Major.”

“It does. After all, once this war ends, no one will treat you and your friends like heroes anymore. You’ll go back to being children. You’re all skilled warriors, but you have nothing more than that. And even still, you want to end the war?”

“Because I don’t want to be a hero.”

Gilwiese cracked a faint, bitter smile.

“I see... I envy you. I... We can’t be that strong. I wish we would, if we only could. Even now.”

Become heroes.

The old nobility of the Empire held on to its pride as warriors. At being those who governed, by virtue of reigning supreme on the field of battle. And this regiment was made of those who couldn’t be accepted into those families, because of their mixed blood.

Perhaps, it was *exactly because they wouldn’t be accepted* that they were desperate to prove their status as nobles.

As Gilwiese spoke with such a solemn face, Svenja tugged on the sleeve of his cinnabar-colored flight suit in complaint.

“And that is precisely why I said that, Brother!”

“Princess, I already told you: It can’t be done.”

“Are you siblings?”

Their family names were different, but since their roots were supposedly similar, it was entirely possible that they really were siblings.

“That’s the first time you’ve actually asked me anything,” Gilwiese said, cocking an eyebrow impishly.

Shin looked a bit taken aback by this, to which Gilwiese laughed before continuing:

“Not siblings, but close enough. It’s not just the Princess here, but all of us at Myrmecoleo are comrades and brethren. Some of us are connected by blood, yes, but some aren’t. I’d imagine it’s much the

same for you.”

The Strike Package. The Eighty-Six who lived and died together on the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s battlefield. After a moment’s thought, Shin nodded. In that regard, Gilwiese was right. The Myrmecoleo Regiment and the Eighty-Six were similar in that relationship. They weren’t bound by blood, but they were brethren by virtue of making the same battlefield their home and the same pride their bond.

“...Yes, it is,” Shin said. “In that case, I leave my ‘younger sister’ in your care, Major.”

“Second Lieutenant Kukumila, yes?” Gilwiese nodded firmly. “She’ll be safe with me, Captain.”

He then cracked a more relaxed, sarcastic smile.

“And so will that problematic black swan.”

“Yes.”

The Senior Research Institute’s 1,720th draft plan, the Black Swan of Death—Trauerschwan.

It’d been under development but hadn’t been completed in time to stop the Morpho during the large-scale offensive. Its introduction to the battlefield was decided due to the discovery of the Noctiluca and the Halcyon.

It was the Federacy’s own *railgun*.

The Halcyon was far too large to be challenged with only Feldreß. And so the Trauerschwan was their linchpin for destroying it in this operation. Michihi and Rito were deployed with the main force ahead of them. They were tasked with guarding it as they advanced into the Legion’s territories. It was, for all intents and purposes, the Federacy Expedition Brigade’s trump card.

The Legion’s railgun was developed to both attack and counterattack from an absurd range of four hundred kilometers, downing enemies with a single destructive shot. And now they had their own absurd long-range, high-caliber railgun to counter it.

But at present...

“I understand that it’s still an incomplete prototype, but I think it’s too soon to bring in that railgun.”

It was supposed to be an absurdly long-range, high-caliber railgun, except that it was still a prototype in development. Its initial velocity of two thousand three hundred meters per second exceeded the maximal velocity of an artillery cannon, but it was a far cry from the Morpho’s initial velocity of eight thousand meters per second.

The same applied for the weight of the warheads it could propel. It could destroy Löwe from hundreds of kilometers away, but the preliminary calculations indicated that to destroy the Halcyon reliably, it would need to fire from twelve kilometers away—a pitifully short range, unworthy of the title of *long-distance cannon*.

A group clad in cinnabar flight suits approached them, their military boots stomping over the floor. The blond female officer at the lead, a captain, saluted while noticeably regarding Shin and Frederica with the slightest of glances.

“Major, it’s nearly time to depart.”

“Understood, Tilda. Princess, let’s go. Thank you for the conversation, Captain Nouzen.”

“Yes, Brother.” Svenja nodded.

Not feeling the slightest bit interested about the female captain’s attitude, Shin felt something suspicious about Gilwiese and Svenja’s exchange.

“You take your Mascot to the front lines?”

Unlike the Reginleif, which was a one-seater, the Vánagandr featured a two-seater cockpit and was a Feldreiß meant to be piloted by a pair. Both the gunner and pilot seat had controls for operating the Vánagandr single-handedly in case of emergencies, though.

As such, a Vánagandr could carry a Mascot—who shouldn’t have been capable of either piloting or shooting as a gunner—into the battlefield by having her occupy one of the seats, but...

Gilwiese’s nod was accompanied by an honest, amicable smile.

“Of course—she *is* our Goddess of Victory.”

Watching the cinnabar-clad group walk off, Frederica glanced up at Shin.

“You deployed me with the Trauerschwan and then delayed my departure for as long as possible so as to prevent them from seeing me, did you not, Shinei?”

“...Yeah.”

But that only ended up forcing the hand of fate. The fact that she’d asked him that question implied that Frederica understood. When Svenja introduced herself, Shin didn’t give Frederica a chance to announce her name, and the conversation with Gilwiese was to prevent her from getting a word in.

“I know not what the generals have told you about the Brantolotes, but you needn’t be so alarmed. The Günter family is a branch of the Brantolote family and rear vassals to the Imperial house. So much like wolves protecting their young, you shall be safe so long as you do not mean them any harm.”

“...They did warn me, yes.”

Before they dispatched, Major General Richard told Shin that while the Strike Package was allowed to speak with the Myrmecoleo’s people, he should be cautious around them. He’d informed him about the rivalry they had with the Pyrope nobles during the final days of

the Empire—the rivalry between the Imperial faction, which abided by the Imperial house, and the New Dynasty faction, which sought to usurp the hegemony.

Archduchess Brantolote was the leader of the New Dynasty faction. This made her an enemy to the Giadian Empire's final empress, Augusta—known to precious few as Frederica.

Even with the Empire having fallen and the Federacy rising in its place, that had not changed. And one of the usurpers' methods of establishing their legitimacy for the throne would be by wedding a woman of the old Imperial house. That meant that with Frederica being the empress, the New Dynasty faction had value in stealing her away.

But that wasn't the only reason Shin was so cautious around Gilwiese.

"His faction aside, I can't bring myself to trust that man personally... I can't really put my finger on it, but..."

Shin narrowed his eyes, thinking back on it. It'd happened during first meeting, back in the Federacy... He'd sensed something ominous from Gilwiese that dredged up undesired memories. It could perhaps be described as a sort of possession. As if the man moved in the name of his objective and nothing else, and so long as he could accomplish that, he wouldn't mind dying.

"He reminds me of myself... Of the way I used to be in the Eighty-Sixth Sector..."



"Vanadis to all advance battalion units. Shifting to phase 2. Make preparations."

"Roger that."



As soon as *it* became apparent, Shiden approached Shin.

It was on their very first day in the Theocracy, the very day Shin heard *it*.

"Take me with you. It has to be me—I have to be the one to put *her* down."

Shin's ability had once been able to perceive every Legion unit across all battlefields of the Republic's Eighty-Sixth Sector. His range was incredibly vast. Until they'd gone farther west from the Republic and reached the Theocracy's land, he couldn't hear the voices of the Legion here. But upon arriving, it became clear whether the Noctiluca

had taken refuge from the Strike Package's pursuit here or not.

"Shiden," he said.

"Don't bother hidin' it from me. If that's yer idea of being considerate, you should know it's none of your business."

Shiden was taller than most women, meaning her eyes met Shin's on roughly the same level. She'd grabbed him by the collar and fixed him with a stern glare. His eyes were like frozen blood. During their first meeting, she'd found the apathy behind his expression irritating, but now she outright hated it.

"I ain't letting anyone take away the right to put her to rest. Not even you—"

Her odd eyes tore into him with the indignant rage of an injured animal. Coolly returning her stare, Shin spoke again.

"*Shiden.*"

It was the voice of the warrior god who once reigned over the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield—a sonorous, commanding voice. Shiden fell silent, like a child who had just been scolded. Using that moment of surprise, Shin shook free from her grasp, catching her own necktie and pulling her closer to him.

"Calm down. You said it yourself. I can't let you join the operation the way you are now."

The way you are now, we can't let you be part of the attack force in the next operation, Operations Commander.

Shiden had told Shin this before the Dragon Fang Mountain operation.

"You'll defeat *her*, and then what? If you think you can just die after putting her to rest, I'm not taking you along. Because it's not that you think it's *fine* to die that way—you *want* to die that way. And I won't bring someone with that kind of attitude along with me. All it takes is one idiot with a death wish to expose everyone else to danger."

You're a liability.

Shiden gritted her teeth. She understood what Shin was getting at. It frustrated her to admit it, but it was obvious. It was the right choice for a captain to make, for a commander. He couldn't bring anyone whom he felt would jeopardize the mission. Any indignation or rage she might be feeling wasn't something he could afford to take into consideration.

And it wasn't because this operation in particular was some kind of difficult balancing act that bringing her along was a bad idea. Shin held the lives of everyone else in his hands no matter which battle they were headed for. He had to stay levelheaded.

But even if she realized it was the sensible choice, her feelings didn't conform to that.

Who...the hell are you...to talk to me like you know anything about this...?

“Die while putting her to rest...? What the hell would *you* know about how that feels?!” she snarled at him.

“Everything,” Shin replied coldly. “I wanted to put my brother to rest during the Special Reconnaissance mission.”

Shiden widened her eyes in surprise. The Special Reconnaissance mission. An operation with a 0 percent survival rate, ordered by the Republic to ensure an Eighty-Six definitely died. A thinly veiled execution order that had been forced onto Shin two years ago.

The fact that he’d said he wanted to “put his brother to rest” meant that his brother, a fellow Eighty-Six, must have been assimilated by the Legion.

“I fought through the Eighty-Sixth Sector just to do that. And I intended to die as soon as I put him to rest... But I cheated death. I survived. And after that...well...you saw what I was like after the battle with the Morpho.”

A year ago, at dawn, after the battle where they hunted that gigantic dragon. He stood like a lost child in the midst of those azure metal butterflies, his pale-white Reginleif tattered and broken.

At the time, Shiden thought he looked unsightly.

“You called me pathetic. And if Lena hadn’t come to help, I’d have died a pitiful death back there. And that’s where you’re headed now... I’m not taking you with me. I won’t let someone like you march to your death.”

The moment this sort of person defeated their target, they would lose their reason to fight and their reason to live...and plummet to their deaths. He wouldn’t let that happen to her.

Shiden gritted her teeth. She then exhaled loudly, as if venting her emotions.

“...You love to talk shit even at times like these, don’t you? ‘Someone like me’? You coulda left that part out.”

Shin scoffed at her.

“The fact that it took you so long to mention that is exactly what I’m talking about. You’re not acting like yourself right now.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever you say. You’re always fucking right, aren’t you?”

She looked away from him with sarcasm in her eyes, scratching her head roughly. She’d gone back to being as thorny toward him as ever.

“...You’re right. I’m not myself right now. So I’ll fix that. I’ll go back to my usual self before the operation starts. So...”

She let the words out in a subdued voice, as if she was aware of the resentment billowing in the pit of her stomach, but she actively

pushed it all away.

“...gimme a little more time before you decide to leave me behind, would ya?”



“Well, one way or another, I made it in time to join the advance battalion, but...”

Having lost her squadron, Shiden’s Cyclops was currently accompanying the Nordlicht squadron. She was with the first group to dispatch, along with Shin and half the Spearhead squadron. Receiving that unexpected call from Shiden, Shin regarded Cyclops with a glance from inside Undertaker’s cockpit. He was in the midst of having the Armée Furieuse attached to his unit. An announcement in the Federacy’s language and then in the Theocracy’s language informed them that the advance battalion was about to depart. The hangar’s shutter opened, and the Processors confirmed that their canopies were sealed. Personnel without protective clothing evacuated to safe rooms.

“But what about Kurena? You sure about leaving her behind?”

Her voice wasn’t teasing. It was concerned. Shin blinked. With a blaring buzz, the hangar’s frontal shutter opened sideways, and the ceiling folded back, revealing an ashen sky. Looking up at it through the optical screen, he replied:

“I’m not leaving her behind, and I don’t intend to, either. Kurena’s a sniper. She has a role to play elsewhere.”

Gunslinger’s familiar cockpit was full of console extensions and sub-windows. Conversion cords and nonstandard cables were roughly fixed into place with duct tape. But as cramped as the cockpit was, Kurena excitedly awaited the moment she’d set out.

As the Theocracy’s army carried out its diversion, the advance force was preparing to set out. Behind the advance force and further down the start-up order was the main force of the Federacy Expedition Brigade, lying hidden in a temporary hangar. There stood the familiar contours of the Reginleifs, as well as the crimson frames of the Free Myrmecoleo Regiment’s Vánagandr.

Along with them was also the Federacy’s prototype railgun, the Trauerschwan. And fixed on the top of its frame was Gunslinger, with Kurena sitting inside it.

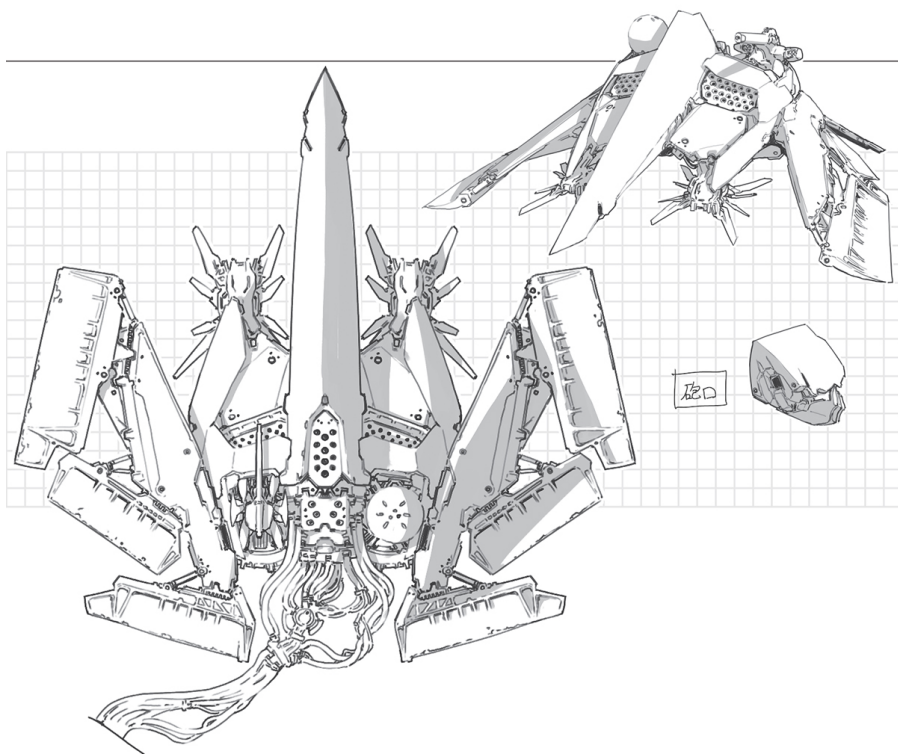
The Trauerschwan was built with the Morpho as its theoretical enemy, and so it was as massive as the Morpho itself, being over ten meters tall and with an overall length of over thirty meters. But unlike

the Morpho and its resemblance to an evil dragon of legend, the Trauerschwan looked like a gigantic, crouching swan—if one were to look upon it so favorably.

It was, after all, a prototype pulled straight out of the lab. It wasn't meant to be in real combat and was covered with dust shields that looked as if they'd been hurriedly applied to it. Its legs looked like a collection of random parts had been jumbled together, each with different coatings and degrees of discoloration. The control chambers for the legs stood asymmetrically on both parts, as if to show how hurriedly they'd been built after the fact. Multiple cords dangled out of them like blood vessels, which crawled up and connected into Gunslinger.

Since its combat-fire control system was incomplete, Gunslinger had to serve as its substitute.

FRIENDLY UNIT



[The Federal Republic of Giad's Prototype Railgun]

Trauerschwan

[S P E C S]

Total Length: 40 m

Total Height: 11.8 m

Armament: 300 mm Railgun [x1]

Manufacturer: Federal Republic of
Giad, Senior Research Institute

A prototype weapon developed by the Federacy to counter large Legion types like the Morpho. Because it was built in a hurry, its wiring has been left exposed, and it requires a Reginleif unit to substitute for its fire-control system.

Its performance is still no match for the Legion's railgun, and it can only launch a limited number of shells. As such, it must anchor itself on the front lines to ensure its shots hit the target reliably.

While difficult to operate effectively, this is one of humankind's few trump cards against the Legion.

It was even more unsightly than the Republic's Juggernaut, which was often referred to as an aluminum coffin. But Kurena was satisfied at the prospect of handling this ugly weapon. She found herself humming a happy little tune. She dangled her legs cheerfully, like a small child excited to go out on a trip.

Because she was happy. Kurena was glad to have been entrusted with this.



“Kurena.”

When Shin handed her the manual for the Trauerschwan, Kurena felt as if he'd just given her an invitation to a fairy-tale ball. A charming evening party at a moonlit castle, magical enough to pull her out of her cinder-covered rags. An enchanted ball where, for one night, only she could wear a silver dress and glass slippers.

The manual was a bundle of files and had no binding; indeed, it was an impromptu manual made up on the spot. But it didn't matter. Her heart leaped with joy as she accepted it.

“As discussed at the briefing, we're letting you serve as the Trauerschwan's gunner.”

“Yeah...!”

They were in the corridor of a residential block in the Theocracy; it had been assigned to the Strike Package and was located in an army base on the rear of the Theocracy's northern front. The corridor was also a pearl-gray color. The passageways were octagonally shaped, and the fragrance of burned incense seemed to linger in the air. The smell of eaglewood filled the area, as if to drown out the stench of blood and steel.

The prototype railgun, Trauerschwan. The overall factors and unresolved problems surrounding its features were explored during the briefing. It was, when all was said and done, a prototype that wasn't meant for live combat. It could fire, but its fire-control system was incomplete. It also lacked a cooling system, which was essential for enduring prolonged combat.

It did have an automatic-reload mechanism, but that was also a prototype and required two hundred seconds to successfully reload. As sluggish as the enemy's movement speed was, the most the Trauerschwan could fire was one or two shots. And with a human handling the sight correction, it was absolutely necessary that the shots be accurate.

And he was leaving this crucial duty solely in her hands.

Shin still trusted her. Shin still needed her. This proved it, and it

made her happy.

Her heart fluttered with excitement. She felt like right now, she could hit the smallest possible target at the longest possible distance right on the bull's-eye.

But at the same time, though her heart was full to bursting, some icy corner of it warned her that she couldn't afford to fail this time. This thought lurked in the back of her mind like an ominous glacier.

That glacier was her unease. In truth, she was incredibly anxious. After all, he trusted her to the point where he'd place this immense responsibility squarely on her shoulders. He believed she was good enough. She couldn't let him down, no matter what.

She couldn't betray his trust.

This time for sure, she would be useful to Shin and the others.

"I can do this."

She said the words as if reaffirming her oath to fight to her last breath alongside everyone else. She hugged the manual, clutching it to her chest as if she feared someone might take it from her.

In a way, it was all she had. Other than her pride and the skills she'd honed for the sake of remaining by his side, she had nothing else.

"This time, I won't miss, no matter what. So you can rest easy. I got this."

Shin furrowed his brow, concerned.

"Don't worry about it. I trust you... I won't abandon you."

Don't abandon me.

Those words had left Kurena's lips just as they retreated from the Fleet Countries. She had voiced her deep desire to cling to him.

"Yeah, I know that." Kurena nodded with a smile, like she'd expected him to say that. "I really do. But I'm an Eighty-Six, too."

She was someone who would fight to the very end.

"Fighting to the death is our pride, and I want to protect that pride, too."

But when she said this, Shin's expression became racked with pain. She had said those words to him when they left the Fleet Countries behind, and he had responded with a similar look. After a moment of contemplation, unsure of whether or not to speak his mind this time, he parted his lips.

"You said we didn't have to change, right?"

"...Yeah."

If it's hard on you, you don't have to force yourself to change.

"If you don't want to change, you can stay the way you are. That's fine. But if you think you *can't* change... If you hold on to that pride like a curse—"

Shin's eyes seemed to be more alive than they had been in the

Eighty-Sixth Sector or on the United Kingdom's battlefield. In the United Kingdom, it felt like he was spurred by fragile unease to walk on a tightrope, to teeter on the razor's edge. And in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, his bloodred eyes were as cold as the surface of a frozen sea.

But at some point, that ice had thawed, and he'd become like the serene surface of a lake. Kurena could see herself reflected in those eyes. They looked upon her with concern, as if enduring a deep pain.

He was right in front of her, so why...why did he feel so far away?

“—then that's a burden you don't need to force yourself to carry.”



“Catapult-rail cooling complete. All joints confirmed locked. Final checklist complete.”

The legs let out a loud, metallic screech as they rotated. They carried the weight of two elongated, ninety-meter-long rails and their plow-shaped recoil absorbers.

Back in the hangar, the rails had been folded back like wings, but now they were deployed and thrust upward, like spearheads pointing at the heavens. Even without accounting for the rails, the machine's overall length was forty meters, standing toe to toe with the Morpho's impressive stature.

Its coating was neither the Federacy's typical metallic coloring, nor the dark brown of its home nation, the Alliance. It was gunmetal black, the color of the Ghost Riders, the spectral soldiers who marched in the dead of night.

The Eighty-Six had seen similar sights several times before. This was like the mechanism that'd been used to launch the Federacy's ground-effect winged vehicle, the *Nachzehrer*, during the Morpho pursuit operation, as well as the Legion support unit they'd pillaged during the United Kingdom operation, the Zentaurs. And finally, a similar mechanism was used in the catapult on the *Stella Maris*'s flight deck to launch shipborne planes.

“Mk. 1 Armée Furieuse launching preparations complete.”

The Reginleifs, resembling twenty-four pitch-black wyverns, stood slowly upon the rails.

“It might be a little too late in the game to ask this, but you were dispatched to the Strike Package as an instructor, right, Captain Olivia?”

Because Raiden had to take over the chain of command in case the captain was out of commission, he couldn't launch at the same time as Shin. The latter led the 1st Platoon, while Raiden led the 2nd

Platoon of the advance force.

The Juggernauts in Shin's platoon sat upon the Armée Furieuse's catapult, awaiting the order to deploy. They stood over ten meters above the ground, where Raiden was. As he looked up, he shifted his focus to the 3rd Platoon, where a single brown Stollenwurm stood among the white units.

Theo had served as the 3rd Platoon's vanguard, and someone had to fill the void left in his absence. To that end, Olivia, who was a melee-combat specialist, joined the fold. It was a welcome contribution, but...

"Should you be part of a live combat unit? And the advance group, at that..."

"...Well, is there a rule that states that an instructor can't fight on the front lines?"

Olivia replied while braiding up his hair inside Anna Maria. Raiden could hear the sound of his hair shuffling around as he tied it behind his head, and the sound of the string straining against his fingers. It sounded awfully close to the sound of an ancient swordsman unsheathing their blade or an archer pulling the string of their bow.

"This is the Armée Furieuse's inaugural battle, and the advance unit will be the first to make use of the Mantle in live combat. As an experienced operator of the Mantle, as well as your instructor, it only makes sense that I join you."

In the militaristic United Kingdom, martial prowess was the pride of royalty, and even princes piloted Feldreß. The same held true for Vika's lieutenant and representative in this mission, Zashya. If need be, it was the duty of a noble daughter of Roa Gracia to protect her liege's heir and territory. Learning how to pilot a Feldreß or wield a firearm in the same way as the most common foot soldier was not seen as shameful, but as a virtue to be praised.

"Ma'am. We've applied as much armor as weight limitations would allow, but Alkonosts are lightly armored units. Please keep that in mind as you fight."

"I am aware. Thank you, Captain."

Zashya had replied to her subordinate's respectful warning from her position in the advance force. Her hair was tied into two braids, and her violet eyes were hidden behind a pair of glasses. She usually used her own unique Barushka Matushka, which was specialized for communication disruption and electronic warfare.

But a Barushka Matushka was too heavy a unit to be part of the advance force. So instead, she joined the front in an Alkonost that had

electronic-warfare tools hurriedly applied to it. The advance force was a small-scale unit that would effectively be isolated within enemy territory. During that time, the Eintagsfliege's electromagnetic interference would disrupt the airwaves, impeding the advance force from receiving information support from Vanadis.

Depending on the situation, the advance battalion's internal data links could be severed. So in place of the main force, Zashya and her unit, Królik, would provide that support for the advance battalion. Normally, the Sirins would be the ones ordered to function as communications relays, but this was the first time the Strike Package would be using the Armée Furieuse. And instances where new weapons were used for the first time were situations that were prone to unexpected developments. The inflexible Sirins couldn't be relied on to handle this. And so Zashya stepped up.

All in the name of her sovereign, for whom she would offer up her flesh and blood.

"We go forth in the name of Prince Viktor. Królik, deploying to achieve the mission. I leave command over the ground forces in your hands."

Despite being part of the Strike Package, Dustin was the least proficient among the Processors. Rather than being stationed with the advance battalion, he was placed in the Expedition Brigade's main force, which was to launch alongside the Trauerschwan.

His normal assignment had been temporarily changed, and he was stationed on the front lines—leaving the Spearhead squadron behind. But it was then that he heard a voice over the Para-RAID.

"Dustin."

Anju?

He checked the Resonance setting and found that it had been set to be the only target of this exchange. Dustin sat up. Just like the rest of the Spearhead squadron members, she was part of the advance battalion. What would prompt her to contact him at a time like this?

"What's wro—?"

"You said you wouldn't die and leave me behind, right?"

Even as she spoke, Anju thought back to the past six months. To the days they'd spent in the Strike Package together and the countless conversations she'd had with Dustin. To the Fleet Countries' people, who had been forced to discard their pride. To Theo, who had his path to purpose severed halfway through.

Just the other day, she'd passed Shin and Kurena and overheard

their conversation. She had heard what Shin told Kurena upon entrusting her with the role of being the Trauerschwan's gunner.

Turning one's pride—which should have been a wish or a dream—into a curse.

It had been on Anju's mind ever since. She couldn't help but wonder if that applied to her, too.

I still have feelings for Daiya...

That wasn't a lie. And yet—

I can't think about you the same way I thought about him.

That was, in fact, a lie.

If she didn't feel anything at all, she wouldn't have taken his hand during that party. She wouldn't have explored that cave with him... She wouldn't have watched the sea, aglow with the phosphorescent light of the Noctiluca, with him. Not as friends, but as something... more?

Yet she still couldn't answer his feelings, because doing so still felt like a betrayal. It would mean forgetting Daiya.

It felt like she was using the memory of Daiya as an excuse not to move forward...

Daiya...wouldn't be happy with how cowardly I'm being, would he?

She took one long breath and exhaled silently, so Dustin wouldn't hear. For some reason, she felt very...afraid. But she choked down the feeling and spoke.

“Can I trust in those words? Because I'll be sure to return to your side, too.”

For a moment, Dustin widened his eyes. But then he nodded resolutely.

“Of course!”

“To the entirety of the Federacy Expedition Brigade, its Federacy soldiers, and the Eighty-Six. This is the Theocracy's 3rd Army Corps commander, Himmelnåde Rêze, speaking. I will be counting on your aid in the annihilation of the Offensive Factory type, Halcyon.”

As the Federacy's forces connected to their intended frequency, the voice of a girl spoke to them through the wireless communicator. Kurena raised her head in surprise.

It's her, the petite Theocracy general. She was only two or three years older than Frederica and a few years younger than Kurena. She had appeared every now and then in the Strike Package's barracks, so Kurena was familiar with her. They'd even spoken, albeit briefly. Just a few days ago... Yes, right around the time Shin told her to act as the



...then that's a burden you don't need to force yourself to carry.

Their pride. Their way of being, to fight until their lives flickered out.

"That's...!"

These were words Kurena couldn't accept. She'd desperately thought to talk back and argue, but Shin raised a hand to cut her off. Sensing the sharpness in his gaze, she followed his line of sight while swallowing her indignation.

Around the corner was a pillar sculpture shaped after a goddess, made of pearly-white glass. The light shining through it refracted into a prismatic glow. It was a winged, headless goddess, said to respect the continent itself.

Standing in the shadow of that pillar was a short girl with long blond hair. She vaguely resembled a fay creature.

"I—I'm sorry...! I didn't mean to interrupt, or rather, to peek or eavesdrop...!" she said in a flustered manner, going red up to her ears.

It was then that Kurena understood that the girl in front of them was misunderstanding what was going on between her and Shin.

"N-no! We're not like that!" Kurena blurted out, but as soon as she realized what she'd just said, she only became all the more panicked.

She'd denied her feelings plenty of times, but never right in front of Shin. But while Kurena was visibly out of sorts, Shin looked at the girl, taken aback in another way.

"You're the Theocracy's corps commander, right? Second General Rèze... What are you doing here?"

"The corps commander?!" Kurena exclaimed.

"N-no, I simply adopted my parents' role...," Hilnå said nervously.

And then after seemingly calming down, she spoke again—her eyes sincere, and golden like the setting sun.

"I thought I would come and greet you, Eighty-Six. As you've said, I am the corps commander, and as such, I've come as a representative of my corps to welcome you as our saviors."

A smile blossomed over her cherubic, pure face.

"...As those who, like me, have known war since infancy."



It was the same voice, but somehow, it came across as sonorous and clear, even through the wireless communicator's rough static noise.

“Save us from our plight, heroes of a foreign land... May the blessings of the earth goddess keep you safe. May the fangs of your steel mounts never dull, and may your shields stand firm.”

She'd probably strained her innocent face into her fiercest scowl and stood as straight and firm as she could.

Save us from our plight, she said.

“I will.”

She'd said these words before.

With her right hand, she unconsciously touched the handgun holstered on her thigh. It was a 9 mm automatic pistol with an internal firing pin. A gun supplied to her by the Federacy, like many of the Eighty-Six, to kill herself in the worst-case scenario and to end the life of her fallen comrades.

She'd never fired a gun for this purpose. Because ever since her time in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, someone else had always shouldered that burden for her.

“Captain Nouzen, the advance battalion is about to set out. This will be our first operational utilization of the Armée Furieuse. Please... remain cautious.”

The advance battalion would be encroaching deep into the Legion territory. There would be nowhere to run. A single mistake could result in Shin and his group being stranded in the middle of enemy territory. The fear of that happening had constantly, throughout the entirety of the operation, run cold through Lena's heart.

Worse yet, there was the possibility of the Rabe or the Stachelschwein detecting them, and if that were to happen, the advance battalion would be defenseless. This operation was that much more dangerous than their previous excursions.

In the operation just before this one, Shin had fallen from the Mirage Spire and plummeted into the sea. What if he hadn't come back from that? She shivered; it felt like an icicle had run down her spine. Lena couldn't suppress her fear, despite her best attempt...

But Shin simply regarded her with a sardonic smile.

“I haven't forgotten the order you gave me when we returned from the Fleet Countries, Lena... I don't think I could forget it even if I wanted to.”

“Shin...!” Lena raised her voice at him, flustered by the teasing attitude in his voice.

Because at that moment, Shin had touched his lips. She could feel it through the Resonance. When they made that promise, he had kissed her... They had also kissed a few times before that, too. This was only acceptable because the two of them alone were Resonated,

but...

No, the Reginleif's mission recorder kept a note of everything the pilot said during an operation. Those recordings had resulted in Shin being embarrassed a few times, so he'd learned his lesson and kept his verbal expressions to things that wouldn't be clear without proper context.

But Lena was privy to the context, and it still embarrassed her. What if Grethe asked her what he meant by that during the debriefing?

...Nothing will happen. I'll just have Shin explain it.

"Is this your idea of getting back at me? Because if something happens, I'll be taking you down with me."

"Oh, so you're aware you've done something that justifies retaliation. I've been wondering if I'm allowed to start sulking about that month you left me hanging before we went to the Fleet Countries."

"Well, yes... But I mean... This'll sound like an excuse, but there's no physical communications line into the training center, and they didn't allow us to send any mail. And the fact that I left this up in the air for a whole month made me feel awkward... Hmm..."

The more she spoke, the more she realized she was in the wrong.

"...I'm sorry."

She heard him chuckle.

"I can't die right after you finally gave me your answer, can I?"

So don't worry. I'll be fine.

Lena smiled at those implicit words. That was why Lena had made that oath back then, wishing for a miracle. It was then that she thought of a way to get back at him.

"Yes... Also, Shin? I actually still have your coat, for when I have to wear the Cicada... You usually put on cologne, right? It smells like you. Sometimes...putting your coat on calms me down."

"—?!"

She could hear Shin suddenly break into a cough. Apparently, this had taken him by surprise. It was a bit indecent of her, but she did feel like he got what he deserved, and so she continued smoothly.

"I'll probably borrow it for every operation from now on. I can hug it tight whenever I feel anxious."

"..."

He fell silent, apparently imagining something... Lena decided to stop at that. She shouldn't tease him any more before an operation.

"I'll return it when the operation's over... I'll personally bring it back each time. So please...let me have the opportunity."

Please...stay safe.

“Take care of yourself.”

“I—,” Shin said, trailed off, and then corrected himself. “**See you then.**”

Lena widened her eyes at those three short words. He didn’t say, *I’m off*. A smile played on her lips. As inappropriate as it may have been, he spoke to her not as a superior officer, but as a comrade. Or perhaps...as someone he’d sworn his life to. That turn of phrase made her happy.

“Yes—be careful!”

“Course clear! Armée Furieuse, commencing launch!”

Their course actually wasn’t clear in the slightest, what with the Eintagsfliege filling their path. On top of that, one wouldn’t normally fling a piloted Feldreß into the air. But in truth, no one was in the state of mind to make jokes.

A shuttle similar to a starting block towed the Reginleifs as they blitzed across the rails. The feeling of being launched was granted by the intense acceleration of an electromagnetic catapult. Shin had experienced it before in simulators and during the Nachzehr’s launch, but he couldn’t get used to it. In the blink of an eye, the catapult had gone from one end of the rails to the other. It then broke at the end of the rails with a loud sound, and the lock was undone.

The Reginleif was a lightweight Feldreß, but it still weighed ten tonnes. And that weight was being thrown into the air at full force into the far reaches of the northern sky.

The Mk. 1 Armée Furieuse, produced by the Alliance of Wald.

An electromagnetic catapult meant for launching Feldreß into the sky, so that they could march across the heavens like the war maiden they were named after and descend upon the battlefield.

A system to allow the Reginleifs to take off, much like the Nachzehr or a ship’s fighter jet, rendering them into airborne armaments.

Shaking off gravity’s hold, the Reginleifs gained altitude, their frames clad with yet another airborne armament—a propulsion device designated the Mantle of Frigga.

A mythical mantle that would turn any who wore it into a hawk. As its name implied, it allowed the Reginleifs to fly through the air while obfuscating their appearance.

Since surface weapons didn’t have an aerodynamic shape that would allow them to maintain balance and altitude, it enveloped them and gave them fairings. It was also equipped with two rocket boosters to lift its ten tonnes into the air. As soon as the fairings left the shuttle, the rockets ignited, and its stabilization wings deployed.

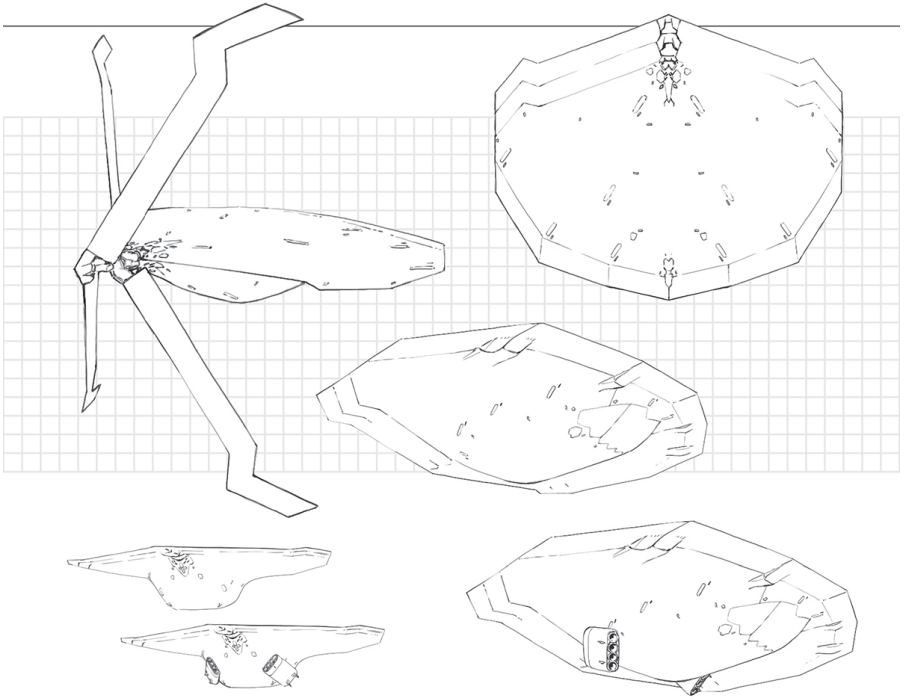
Upon achieving thrust, the Mantle of Frigga rushed up into the skies. True to its name as a mantle, it was covered by thin silver flakes the size of bird feathers, which deflected light and radio waves, flickering all the while.

Having gained wings of flame and hidden behind argent plumes, the Reginleifs soared.

As Gilwiese looked up from the front lines, he couldn't properly see the Juggernauts as they sailed through the sky. They flew at altitudes and speeds that weren't visible to people on the ground. He simply stared, knowing they must be up there in this cloudy sky of ash, and muttered to himself.

"An army of ghosts flying through the sky, led by a war deity, the god of death. These were the Ghost Riders."

FRIENDLY UNIT



[Special Reginleif Aerial Armament]

Mantle of Frīja

[S P E C S]

Total Length: 13.83 m

Wingspan: 16.34 m

Equipment: Rocket Boosters [×2]

Manufacturer: Alliance of Wald,
Second Yasen Factory

A large aerial armament meant to keep Reginleifs that have been launched into enemy territory airborne. It was based on the Zentaurs and developed in cooperation with the Alliance of Wald. The reinforced self-propulsion catapult Armée Furieuse launches the Reginleifs from the surface.

Upon reaching maximum altitude, the Mantle deploys and uses large revolving wings to help a reginleif achieve flight for a set distance before beginning to descend.

It also possess advanced stealth features, developed using materials and data based on the Eintagsfliege.

The warrior deity who led that army of ghosts also doubled as a soul reaper who governed over the souls of dead soldiers. The war dead gathered under that god, offering up their souls to march in glorious battle under his service forevermore.

But how did the warrior deity feel about that?

Shaking his head once, Gilwiese got his Vánagandr to rise to its feet. It was a unit dyed in the Myrmecoleo Regiment's unique cinnabar coating, as opposed to the Federacy's usual metallic color. The Personal Mark on its side was that of a sea turtle with the head of a calf—identifier: Mock Turtle.

“Mock Turtle to all units—we're heading out, too.”

The silver flakes covering the Mantle of Frigga and the Juggernaut's exterior were, in fact, Eintagsfliege wings. Or to be exact, they were imitations modeled after them. The Strike Package had successfully raided and conquered Legion production bases in the past. One among them was the Dragon Fang Mountain base, where they'd taken custody of Zelene. During that time, they'd also taken some samples, which then were used to create this device.

Metallic-foil hawk feathers that disturbed, refracted, and absorbed all manner of electromagnetic waves, including light. During their development in the Alliance, they were given the moniker *Whitehawk Plumes*.

The Mantle's electromagnetic-disruption capabilities allowed it to hide the Reginleifs both from the Rabe, which flew high above them and was equipped with an antiair radar, and the earthbound Stachelschwein's radar.

But an aircraft's jet-engine intake would still suck up the feathers, which would destroy the engine much like the Eintagsfliege did. Instead, the Mantle used rocket boosters, which didn't need to take in air for its combustion and could fly through these clouds of silver feathers. However, it was too ineffective to fill in for a jet engine. The only thing it could do was launch things that were lighter than a fighter jet, propelling them in a one-way trip.

As the Reginleifs soared through the air, the temperatures outside their units were low enough to freeze one's lungs at this altitude. Shin inspected his altimeter. The rocket engine finished its combustion and, with its task done, was jettisoned from the Mantle.

In its place, a pair of wings and propellers meant for gliding unfolded and deployed. The rocket engine was highly inefficient for actual flight. Even the Federacy military rarely used it for its aircraft, only utilizing them to achieve the needed altitude and gather kinetic

energy, which would be used for gliding down. And so the Reginleifs would descend from the air, like an army of ghosts.

The artificial wings caught the wind, turning the units' trajectory from an ascent to a lax descent. Shin felt his blood and organs shift upward, which induced an odd, unfamiliar sense of floating. He tensed up—humans were flightless creatures, and being at such altitudes filled them with an instinctual fear of falling and crashing from a great height.

They swooped diagonally down the frigid sky. The airborne units began their rapid descent into the depths of enemy territory.



Even on this far-northern battlefield, reports from Legion patrol units that had engaged enemy forces were swiftly picked up by the Rabe soaring in the heavens. Upon receiving one such report from a Tausendfüßler moving swiftly through the front lines for resupplying purposes, the Rabe didn't panic. It simply paused for a moment before deciding on a directive.

<<Remains of a unit not registered in the database detected. Presumed to be a rocket engine.>>

And yet there were no reports of any enemies infiltrating the relevant sector. Neither the Ameise keeping watch over the front lines nor the Stachelschwein watching over the skies of the rear areas noticed anything. And the Rabe's own radar didn't pick up anything, either.

But given the temperature of the discovered engine, it hadn't been long since it'd been ignited and fell. It couldn't have been an undiscovered engine belonging to some unknown, downed unit. Which meant it was likely discarded en route.

This came from an airborne attack that used some kind of electromagnetic-interference mechanism to deceive the radar.

It was likely similar to the Legion's own tactic of attaching rocket boosters and gliders to the Ameise to allow them to soar in from above. In which case, the objective of the enemy unit would be...

<<Eagle Five to Plan Ferdinand. Enemy-unit infiltration confirmed.>>

The Rabe sent an alert to their trump card, which was positioned in the back of the Legion's lines, rather than being on the offensive. This was an airborne advance on the depths of the Legion's territories. It couldn't have been done simply in the name of disturbing the front lines.

<<Enemy objective presumed to be the destruction or capture of Plan Ferdinand. Remain alert.>>

<<Plan Ferdinand to Eagle Five. Acknowledged.>>

<<Integrated features activated. Colare Synthesis, activation standby.>>

<<Melusine One, combat activation standby.>>

“They noticed us.”

Shin squinted as he heard the Halcyon’s howl, revealing that it was combat operational. Still, it didn’t appear that its optical sensors or indeed any anti-air units seemed to have fixed on them. The Legion likely had found a jettisoned engine. The Whitehawk Plumes should have kept the Reginleifs concealed even at this short distance. Meanwhile, a large, metallic shadow was coming into view. They were above their planned landing position.

Of course, Shin’s ability to hear the ghosts had been faintly detecting the Halcyon’s howling for a good while now.

“...If I knew this was going to happen, I’d have mastered using this thing sooner,” Shin whispered. He spoke silently enough so that it wouldn’t be picked by the Para-RAID as he regarded Shiden’s Cyclops with a glance.

Their descent continued as the Halcyon’s massive frame grew closer beneath them. Much like how the Phönix used the Eintagsfliege for optical camouflage, the Mantle of Frigga deceived even the rays of visible light given off by radar. The Legion’s blue optical sensors still couldn’t detect the Reginleifs. Under the Mantle’s protection, the Feldreß veered toward the adjacent high-rise buildings.

Their touchdown point was the ruins of a former Theocracy military base, which had been built over what was once a city. The buildings were like gigantic grave markers, and they hid Undertaker and the other Reginleifs from the Halcyon’s sight. The ashen ground grew closer and closer. Coupled with Shin’s altimeter, a pair of deceleration wings flapped open, rapidly curbing the unit’s falling speed.

“Mantle of Frigga, disengaged.”

A holo-window’s display lit up, and the unit’s gliding wings and fairings closed. Immediately after, a powerful force shook the Reginleif. The intense impact of the landing ran through the fuselage as it kicked up a cloud of volcanic ash.

The snow-white Valkyries had descended upon the battlefield of ash and silver.

INTERLUDE

WHERE WAS THE BLUE BIRD ALL ALONG?

“So you’ll be going back to the Federacy tomorrow, eh, kid?”

The heavily injured who had remained hospitalized in the Fleet Countries were being gradually transferred to hospitals in the Federacy. Theo was to be the last transfer. He was scheduled to be moved the following day. His stay in this northern seaside town felt like it had been quite long and, at the same time, like it had passed by in the blink of an eye.

“Yeah... Hmm. Thank you for looking after me for so long...,” Theo said with a light bow.

Ishmael frowned and waved his hand dismissively.

“Cut that out. We’re the ones who ought to be thanking you.”

“But, Captain...”

“I ain’t got a ship to captain anymore, kid.”

“...But you’re a naval captain. I know you’re busy, but you always visit me.”

Ishmael would come carrying roses, which were red to an almost exaggerated degree, and he took advantage of the fact that the hospitalized had nowhere to run to bring local delicacies that the Fleet Countries’ people used to tease tourists.

The first time, he arrived wearing a large sheet, pretending to be a ghost. It was a prank hackneyed enough to get Theo to shout and throw things at him. It was annoying and loud... And Theo was honestly grateful for it. He’d have been so much more depressed had he been left alone. It’d give unwanted thoughts time to run rampant through his mind.

Maybe he'd have been better off if he'd listened to Ishmael and reflected on his words to begin with. On the idea of staying in this world, even after losing the pride you held on to so dearly.

Unable to find the right words, Theo muttered quietly.

"...Can I be honest?"

This was a confession he couldn't make to any of his friends, not even Shin. He knew it'd make him a burden, and he didn't want that. Saying the words would be little more than complaining at this point. It would be whining, and he didn't want his friends to deal with that. But this man...might hear him out.

"I don't...want to stop being a Processor."

As Theo spoke, something wet streaked down his cheeks and dripped onto the floor.

"I never wanted war, but I do want to fight alongside them until I have no fight left. I wanted to go with them to the next operation... I hate this. I hate that it has to end like this, with everything still up in the air."

"...Yeah." Ishmael nodded deeply.

His emerald eyes were as deep and fathomless as the southern seas. Theo couldn't remember his father, but his eyes were probably the same color.

"That must be what it feels like. I won't say I understand how you feel, of course. It's just not that simple."

"You do understand. I mean, the Stella Maris—"

"Right. That was her final voyage."

The damages inflicted on it by the Noctiluca didn't render that massive ship completely incapable of self-propulsion, but the Fleet Countries lacked the strength to repair it. Just as the Strike Package had been told during the operation, they couldn't rebuild the Orphan Fleet anymore. They were putting what materials they did have aside for the sake of potentially rebuilding the fleet after the war. But how long could they keep saying that? Even if the war ended, it could take them centuries to restore the fleet to its former glory.

The supercarrier, the anti-leviathan ships, the long-distance cruisers... Their construction wasn't done by the Fleet Countries' initiative. It was through the help of the Gadian Empire.

And ship-building techniques were of no use in the Legion War. Neither Theo nor Ishmael could tell how much of that knowledge would be passed down to future generations. It could very well be left uninherited, or perhaps, the Federacy wouldn't be willing to assist with the rebuilding efforts. The fleet might never be rebuilt at all.

"I stopped being part of the Open Sea clans. That's how things

have been for all those years we've been hunting down those pieces of scrap."

But he still had to live on. To cling to life, so as to not bring shame to those who'd died.

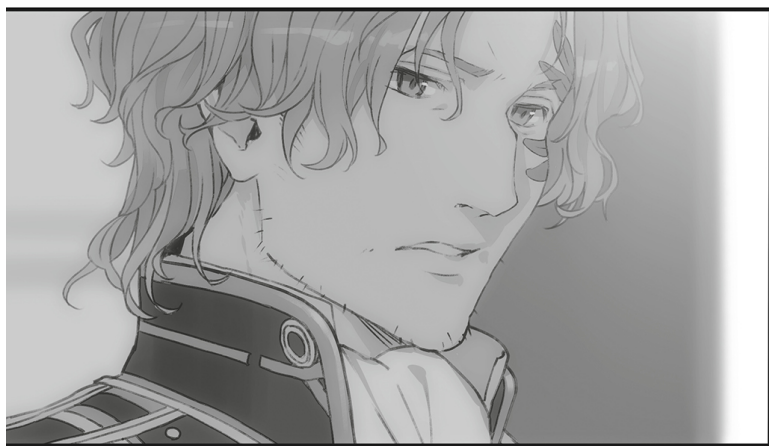
Ishmael did it. And so would Theo. And to that end...

"I hope I find something, too," Theo said. "Something new to hold on to."

"You will. And you don't need to rush. It took me years of searching and wandering. That's why...when you're lost, when you have no idea where to go, I'll be there to hear you out, kid. We're related, after all. Even if that connection is a thousand years old."

He'd told Theo much the same thing before the Mirage Spire operation. But this time, Theo smiled sarcastically. He no longer felt the blind, reckless sense of refusal and denial that had been hanging over him at the time.

Frederica once said that people were made up of the blood that ran through their veins, the lands they called home, and the bonds they forged. Those words had truth to them, but at the same time, they were also wrong. People, and indeed the Eighty-Six, couldn't hold on to their identities alone. They needed a place to return to. People to live beside. Everyone did.



But back then, and even now—they weren't alone. They had comrades. Theo had Shin, Raiden, Anju, and Kurena. Those comrades were his place to return to, the "bonds" that gave him shape. They defined one another, supported one another.

And even now, when he could no longer fight, he still wanted to believe that he could return to them if he wished it. And that was why he got through each day without losing track of who he was.

Because his comrades allowed him to put his faith in them.

And it was at this point that he realized that Grethe and Ernst—that the Federacy had sought them out, too.

Bonds of blood. Bonds of the land. The things they'd lost.

They *could* be reclaimed.

Those weren't things he'd had since birth, like his family or his homeland. Those were things he'd gained at the end of his road. Even if he were to lose them, he could find new things to hold on to and new places to be. He could find someone to lean on during the hardest times. Like this thousand-year relative of his.

"...Thanks, Uncle," Theo said.

Ishmael furrowed his brow unpleasantly.

"At least call me a big brother. Go on, try saying it."

Theo smiled. Like a nephew might smile at a distant uncle who was only slightly older than he was.

"Nah."

CHAPTER 3

OFF WITH HER HEAD!

“Hmm... Captain? Captain...Nouzen.”

At the time, Kurena still called Shin *Captain Nouzen*. She'd only just been assigned to his unit, but she'd heard the rumors about him in the previous theater. The Eighty-Sixth Sector's headless reaper. Anyone who fought beside him, except for the “werewolf” who served as his lieutenant, died. A cursed Processor. She was afraid of those rumors, and his icy demeanor did nothing to make them seem less credible. So she'd hardly spoken to him.

At the time, Shin had only just started to grow, and his body wasn't so much slim as it was scrawny and fragile-looking. He'd hardly spoken, and his expression rarely seemed to change. He didn't come across as someone who trusted others. And so he simply answered Kurena's call by looking at her.

His eyes were red like blood. The color shed by those destined to perish. Staring into his cold gaze made Kurena reflexively tense up. They likely called him a reaper because he seemed to bear the color of death in him. And the names of his dead comrades. Their hearts. And the duty of carrying them all without fail to the final destination.

Our Reaper, they called him.

The only precious salvation left to the Eighty-Six, who had been forsaken by God.

It was only the previous day that Kurena first saw it. The sight of him putting to rest a comrade who'd been fatally injured but couldn't die. The sight of him delivering the final bullet.

“Hmm... I...”

The combat zone that the Halcyon occupied was, until just a few years ago, a Theocracy frontline base. And prior to that, it was an old city that now lay in ruins. The dim white tiled walls felt like gravestones, and the rectangular high-rise buildings stood around the field of combat like walls of masonry.

There was a row of buildings the same pearl-gray color as the Theocracy's home front bases, and among them stood an abandoned anti-aircraft gun tower. Undertaker landed behind that tower, settling onto the ash-covered ground.

The Mantle of Frigga blew off and caught fire, crumbling in midair into a shower of sparks. The five other units in his platoon landed after him and then silently deployed into a formation. They moved quickly after landing, reducing the amount of time they would be defenseless, and took cover behind the nearby buildings.

“—4th and 5th Platoons, report in.”

“All units of the 5th Platoon have landed successfully, Shin.”

“Same goes for the 4th Platoon. Proceeding to assist other platoons' units.”

Shin's call was promptly answered. The 4th Platoon's captain wasn't part of the first defensive unit of the first ward, but they were a Name Bearer who survived last year's large-scale offensive. Their skill and command were a match for Anju, Raiden, Kurena, and any of the other platoon captains. The same held true for the 3rd Platoon's captain, who was filling in for Theo.

The Nordlicht and Scythe squadrons soon reported their arrival. Following them were the 2nd and 3rd groups. All the airborne battalion's units had landed successfully. Lastly, Zashya placed Królik at a point of high altitude, so as to serve as their relay for the data link.

“Królik, reporting in. I have visual confirmation of the target. Commencing analysis and transmitting footage.”

“Roger that. All units, remain on standby in your positions and confirm the footage—”

But he didn't get to finish that sentence. Countless rumbling, deafening roars that weren't picked up by the audio sensors shook their units. The Halcyon rose to its feet on the other side of the buildings, its massive form filling up the bottom half of Shin's optical screen.

“N-no way...!”

“Shit, it's massive...!”

Someone's gasp of disbelief leaked into the Resonance. Even the Eighty-Six, seasoned veterans that they were, were struck with fear

and awe at its unbelievable size. The stout contours of its round, hill-like back were reminiscent of a wild boar or a hedgehog. It stood forty meters tall, and its overall span was roughly seven hundred meters wide. It was like a gigantic, quill-less porcupine.

Even a Dinosauria felt like a gnat compared with this massive form. The Halcyon was originally a Weisel, so every time it touched the earth, it revealed holes in its underbelly. Those were meant for rolling out newly produced Legion units, but they only looked like pinholes now. The Halcyon was dotted with optical sensors, which were there as if to cover for any of its large body's countless blind spots.

Along the center of its back was a fanlike structure reminiscent of a fighting fish's dorsal fin or a peacock's tail—a row of heat sinks, which all the Legion employed. This indicated the unbelievable fact that even this monster wasn't a simple production plant but an autonomous combat machine capable of movement.

It was like seeing a behemoth resurrected in mechanical, clockwork form. Like the multiheaded dragon of Revelation. But instead of seven heads, it was crowned by five 800 mm railguns, each of them swerving and turning in search of the headless skeletons hiding in the shadow of the ruins' rubble.

Shin spoke, his voice cautious but calm.

"All units, remember what I told you during briefing. Our objective is destroying and, if possible, seizing the Halcyon. The airborne battalion's role is to incapacitate it, even temporarily, and keep it occupied until the Trauerschwan reaches its firing position."

They'd observed as much even during the operation's drafting stages, but with the enemy right in front of them, it was evident that it would be difficult to damage this opponent with a Reginleif's 88 mm cannon. A bombardment from the Trauerschwan's high-caliber railgun would be a necessity in this operation.

"The Spearhead squadron will handle stalling the Halcyon, while the Scythe, Nordlicht, Stinger, Fulminata, and Sarissa squadrons will work on distracting and destroying each of the five railguns. From left to right, the railguns will be designated Frieda, Gisela, Helga, Isidora, and Johanna."

In addition to serving as a communications relay, Królik also served as a command support unit. The five railguns projected onto his optical screen were overlaid with the names he'd just designated them with. He'd based it on the designations that Yuuto had given the Noctiluca's railguns, filling in the rest in accordance to phonetic code. Those were designations that weren't meant to be carried over to concurrent operations.

"The Scythe squadron is to handle Frieda. The Sarissa squadron is

to handle Gisela. The Stinger squadron will handle Helga, the Fulminata squadron will handle Isidora, and the Nordlicht squadron will handle Johanna. There are no other active Legion units in the combat area except for the Halcyon, but remain vigilant of attacks from inactive units.”

“Roger that,” the Scythe’s squadron’s captain replied. **“Thankfully, this is an urban battlefield with lots of buildings. We can close in on it by drawing the railguns’ attention and letting the buildings take the fire for us.”**

“I’ll keep track of the railguns’ sights,” Zashya said. **“Given how fast their shots are, it’d be pretty much impossible to dodge them after they shoot. If you receive a warning that you’re in the enemy’s sights, prioritize evasion above all else.”**

“And artillery squadrons like our Archer squadron and the Quarrel squadron will be in position to offer covering fire for the melee squadrons. We’ll be hiding behind the buildings, just like how the Spearhead squadron’s going to move...”

Two pairs of butterfly wings that looked like they were woven together from silver thread flapped open imposingly behind each of the railguns. These helped exhaust heat—an omen that the railguns were combat operational. Ten pairs, making for a total of twenty wings, blotted out the sky behind the Halcyon.

The rumbling of several groans and screams surged up from the belly of the beast, emanating from the Halcyon’s core. One of them was a voice Shin had already heard once: the jumble of agonized moans and howls that had resounded from the Noctiluca. Shin narrowed his eyes as he looked upon it.

I hope you get your chance to take revenge on it.

Yes. This is the battlefield where that’ll happen.

And as the five railguns booted up, their own control cores raised their voices in five different screams. Four of them were unfamiliar moans, shrieks, wheezing breaths, and cries of agony... But one of them was a familiar, anguished whisper. The cold, hollow lamentation of a girl who had died a watery death on that cerulean battlefield.

<<...So cold.>>

Shana.

The Para-RAID transmitted that voice dozens of kilometers away, to Lena’s, Frederica’s, and Kurena’s ears.

<So cold—sO coLD. SocoldSOCOLD so COLD.>>

“No...!”

As Kurena waited for the airborne battalion's cue that they'd opened hostilities with the enemy, she stood atop the Trauerschwan's frame. Upon hearing that voice, her breath caught in her throat.

During the battle with the Noctiluca, Shana had scaled the Mirage Spire to snipe it down. As a result, she couldn't escape in time and died in battle. As if perishing in place of Kurena, who, despite being a skilled and designated sniper, was too paralyzed by doubt and fear.

Shana had plummeted into the water along with the collapsing steel tower. The Noctiluca, which had navigated those same depths, likely collected her body and integrated her neural network into one of its railguns.

Not as a Black Sheep, but as a Shepherd.

The dark, frigid waters of the northern sea were cold to the point of near freezing. The decomposition of Shana's brain tissue following her death had probably taken longer as a result. Shin, who could hear the mechanical ghosts' voices, had to have known that.

The realization shook her.

It can't be.

She'd thought that Shin decided against bringing her along to the airborne battalion because he trusted her skill as a sniper. But could it be that wasn't his *real* reason? What if it was the opposite? What if he didn't bring her because *he couldn't trust her to fight Shana*, who'd died because of her cowering? Because he'd judged that having her at his side in that condition would be too dangerous...?

As soon as Shana's weeping had reached them, Undertaker's radar screen detected one Juggernaut leaping to the fore. He didn't even need to check its identifier to know who it was. The Nordlicht squadron's Cyclops.

Shiden.

He'd reflexively thought to reprimand her, but then he reconsidered. This was why he'd assigned the Nordlicht squadron to handle Johanna. Shiden was acting on an impulsive outburst, but so long as she stuck to the mission, he could overlook it.

“Shiden, ‘Shana’ is inside Johanna's control core. Can you take care of it?”

She didn't answer his question. He concluded that she probably did hear him, so instead, he directed the question at the Nordlicht squadron's captain.

“Bernholdt, the idiot's going feral, like we thought. Keep an eye on her.”

“Ugh. Yeah, everything really went the way we thought it

would... Roger that."

This time, Shiden actually replied, her voice thick with annoyance: **"I heard that, Shin! Who you callin' an idiot?!"**—which silenced Shin and Bernholdt's exchange. She was apparently more collected than they'd anticipated. The fact that she'd called Shin by his name instead of using her usual nickname for him was proof that she wasn't completely calm, though.

"...It's almost impressive that you two butt heads even at a time like this," Bernholdt remarked.

"She ignores transmissions in the middle of an operation. Calling her an idiot works just fine... But I'm counting on you."

Bernholdt and the Vargus should be able to keep up with Shiden, even if she pulled some reckless trick. That was why he placed her in the Nordlicht squadron to begin with.

He felt Bernholdt crack a small smile.

"Say no more, Captain. All right, let's get going, boys! We gotta cover for this missy when she starts getting reckless!"

With Cyclops springing forward and acting as their opening shot, the airborne battalion's eight squadrons moved into action. They sprinted across the ruins, which were covered by the sea of ash, making their way for the imposing behemoth standing above them.

The Spearhead squadron's objective was to incapacitate the Halcyon. To do that, they first needed to cling to the enemy, and as such, they went around the outer rim of the city ruins, hoping to get behind it.

Two squadrons were equipped with artillery configurations to offer covering fire in the battle against the railguns. To that end, they moved closer to the Halcyon's flank to assume firing positions. They, as well as Spearhead, traveled in the shadows of the buildings, so as to avoid detection by the enemy.

Meanwhile, the five squadrons in charge of eliminating the railguns deployed throughout the vast urban area, using the city as their cover from the massive turrets' sights. They neared the Halcyon's jugular like five talons. They also doubled as a distraction to divert the Halcyon's attention from the Spearhead squadron's approach.

The Reginleifs intentionally showed themselves, but they raced about the battlefield so as to not show their total numbers to the enemy. As they moved, the Halcyon's sensors detected them one by one. The menacing barrels swerved, loudly slashing through the wind as they swung. They switched from a curved position, which marked that they were searching for the enemy, to a linear bearing signaling that they were taking aim.

The volume of their howls pitched up, as if they were beckoning something.

“...!”

Running across the Theocracy’s city road, which had been set up in a pattern resembling a chessboard, Shin suddenly paused. Having heard those howls, he looked up at once. That sound didn’t belong to a hidden unit lying in wait in standby mode. It was another voice that boomed up from within the Halcyon’s depths.

The next moment, slits opened up on the sides of the heat sinks, firing something out. These objects moved through the air in a curve, slow enough for a human’s kinetic vision to handily catch sight of them. There were so many of them, curled up and hugging their knees as they sped through the air...

Self-propelled mines?

But why? Why use self-propelled mines *now* of all times? Shin didn’t understand the enemy’s intent, but he gave the warning all the same. The experience that had kept him alive for so long told him that the enemy’s plan being unclear only meant they had to be more cautious.

“All units. Self-propelled mines are being fired from the target’s interior. Their intent is unknown, but avoid contact with—”

“—Ugh, the railguns’ sights are fixed!”

A warning had cut into his words. Zashya. She’d positioned herself above them to help with communications support and combat analysis and volunteered to assist with evasive maneuvers.

“Cyclops, Freki Three, Vikodlak, get away! And be careful of a second volley from Isidora and Gisela—”

But then Olivia swallowed nervously.

“—All units, dodge! Forget its lines of fire; anyone who’s in front of a railgun, get away!”

The next moment, all five railguns roared as one. No one in the airborne battalion could immediately realize what happened just then. They naturally couldn’t, since the railguns’ firing speed was eight thousand meters per second. A human’s dynamic vision couldn’t hope to perceive something moving at that speed.

The scenery of the ruins completely and utterly *disappeared*.

It wasn’t just a single point on the battlefield. It was as if some invisible, gigantic hands had scooped up the land from above. Five different points, each of them in a fifty-meter radius, were wiped out.

Just as Olivia, with his ability to see three seconds into the future, had warned them, a large-scale storm of destruction had obliterated all the structures in its range, gouging a circular wound into the city

ruins.

A moment later, the screeching of the wind repeatedly filled their audio sensors. The 800 mm shells, each weighing a dozen tonnes, had fired at essentially point-blank range, with their initial velocity preserved. Their impact had unleashed vast amounts of kinetic energy that tore the ground apart, but the advance battalion couldn't even hear the rumbling sound of its blast. Some structures stood oddly, as if they'd been cut clean through. But then they slid along their cross section, as if remembering that gravity applied to them, and crashed into the pulverized earth of the ruins.

That last-second warning came just in time. The Eighty-Six were used to not standing directly opposite their enemies. After all, facing a Löwe or a Dinosauria in those aluminum coffins, with their measly firepower, would be suicidal. None of the Juggernauts had been caught up in the wide radius of destruction. However...

"What the hell...?"

...more explosions roared through several other spots in the city. These were places that couldn't evade the railguns' fire and had the self-propelled mines implode on them. The moment Shin saw the railgun turrets turn in the direction of the detonations, he realized why the Halcyon had scattered those self-propelled mines.

Checking the data link, he confirmed that all their units were still intact. None of them had been sunk by the mines. The speedy Reginleifs and the thickly armored Vánagandr's wouldn't be so easily wrecked by self-propelled mines. In other words, the Halcyon didn't scatter the self-propelled mines to destroy any Feldreß, but rather...

"Anyone who had a mine detonate on them, get away and assume evasive maneuvers! It's using the sound of the blasts to track you!"

Since they were fighting in an urban area with poor visibility, the self-destruction's sound was being used as a signal to quickly inform the Halcyon of the enemy's positions. The next moment, the railguns roared again. The wind gave a shrill howl as five more iron fists gouged into the ground, turning structures into circular patches of scorched earth.

Shin heard five Processors heave sighs of relief as they narrowly evaded those shots. One of them, Bernholdt, proceeded to click his tongue.

"I guess appropriating the self-propelled mines as a kind of alarm system is one way to use them... And as an added bonus, any place they detonate gets blasted to hell..."

The rubble crumbled down yet again. The buildings stood gouged, as if a knife had cut through them without regard for concrete or metal. And then there was the matter of that shrill sound of the wind, the fact that the kinetic energy's transmission was overwhelming, and

the blast radius being too vast for the diameter of the shells.

All the Juggernauts that had tried to approach the Halcyon, Undertaker included, were too close to follow it with their optical sensors. But Królik, which had hung back, could probably see everything properly.

“Królik, did you catch that with your optical sensor? Can you analyze—?”

“I just barely saw it when it fired a second time. The enemy’s using chain shots!”

Before he could ask anything further, Zashya transmitted the results of her analysis. The footage sent from the Królik’s optical data was slightly low quality, but it narrowly caught the moment prior to impact. As soon as the 800 mm diameter shell hit the ground, it transformed into a massive, fifty-meter form. At first, it looked like a flat silver discus, but it was, in fact, closer to a casting net.

“As soon as the shell leaves the muzzle, it splits and disperses around in a circle. The main warhead in the center and seven other smaller bombs are connected together like a spiderweb by molecular wires. They destroy or just cut through everything in a fifty-meter radius within its line of fire... Back when sailboats were being used, chain shots were made by tying shells together with chains to snap the masts of enemy ships. It’s similar to that.”

Focusing the destructive force in one spot lent it more penetrating force, but if one’s aim was to maximize the range of their destruction, spreading it over a line would be more effective. It made it easier to hit the target when firing at close range, where it was difficult to influence the trajectory. By connecting the seventy-six points into a line, it created a *surface* of wires.

This marked a new attack method. It wasn’t a long-distance cannon’s fire, which could destroy entire bases or penetrate bunkers, but a short-distance shell that swept through a wide area.

“...This is an anti-Feldreß...an anti-Reginleif countermeasure.”

A countermeasure against the Strike Package, which had successfully defeated two Legion units, the Morpho and the Noctiluca... A countermeasure against them.

The diversionary force had drawn the attention of the grand majority of the Legion forces, but even so, the route that the Trauerschwan and the Federacy Expedition Brigade took was by no means free of enemies. Having received word that the advance battalion had opened hostilities, the main force of the Federacy Expedition Brigade finally engaged the Legion forces twenty kilometers away from their

designated firing point.

They'd entered combat with each unit moving in a diamond formation; scout units led the pack, positioned along the front and back of each formation. This consisted of two Reginleif scout battalions and the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment as vanguards.

The three groups were met with a dark cloud—a large force of mechanical ghosts, as numerous as their name implied. And in addition to them, there was also something unique to the blank sector's battlefield...

“...?!”

Just as Gilwiese fixed his sights on a Löwe's flank, he'd swallowed nervously as Mock Turtle's back legs sunk into the ground. There was a cavity hidden under the layer of ash covering the ground, and he'd mistakenly stepped into it.

He operated the control sticks swiftly, paying no heed to Svenja's yelp. She was seated snugly in the gunner seat behind him. Gilwiese quickly adjusted Mock Turtle's bearing and pulled the trigger. The Vánagandr's high-fidelity fire-control system knew to keep its sights fixed on an enemy that was within its firing range. Even if the unit had been tilted or even toppled over, it kept its turret's sights fixed on the enemies it had locked onto.

The 120 mm turret gave off a truly deafening roar as it fired. Having been pierced through its flank, the Löwe billowed flames and crumpled to the ground. With the intense recoil of the shot flinging it back, Mock Turtle withdrew its legs and fixed its posture. It was only then that Gilwiese finally let out his held breath.

“My apologies, Princess. Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes... This is nothing to me, Brother.”

Apparently, as the shot's recoil pushed them back, she'd banged her head against the backrest. The Mascot girl tried to rub the pain away from her small head, bravely nodding through tear-filled eyes. She then hurriedly fixed her dress, which was now disheveled. As Archduchess Brantolote's “daughter,” she stood as the symbol of the Imperial units and wasn't allowed to have an unsightly appearance, even on the battlefield.

Looking around, Gilwiese could see the other Vánagandrs around him and the scout units' Reginleifs getting their legs caught and tripped by the brittle ash. On top of that, his optical screen was dotted with an odd, faint muddiness. Each time they moved quickly, the volcanic ash's sharp edges cleaved small, gradual scratches into their optical sensors' lenses.

But worst of all...

“Ugh, not again—the range-finder laser...!” an annoyed shout echoed through the company's radio.

As the wind began to intensify, it kicked up a thick curtain of ash, which interrupted their main armament's aiming laser. The fire-control system couldn't calculate the shell's trajectory to the target properly without it; it used the laser to apply corrections to the shot and couldn't collect accurate information without it.

He'd held back the urge to click his tongue; he was in the Princess's presence, after all. Instead, Gilwiese whispered bitterly. He'd thought they'd trained thoroughly in preparation of any development, but...

"We didn't account for this. The true ruler of the blank sector isn't the Legion. It's the ash."

It wasn't visible from between the high-rise buildings, but Shin remembered seeing the mountain of rubble piled up behind the Halcyon when they swooped down. It was the remains of all the metallic resources it consumed. This behemoth had likely stopped in this city for the purpose of replenishing supplies...meaning it had plenty of spare ammunition.

This was a problem.

Shin could hear where the self-propelled mines were positioned, of course, but there were simply too many of them. He couldn't alert all his squad members. An urban battlefield meant there was a lot of cover, and since the self-propelled mines were roughly the size of a human, both the radar and the optical screen could easily overlook them.

Worse yet, since the radar and the optical screen could be impeded by all the cover, the Halcyon opted to use large numbers of self-propelled mines in place of the Ameise, which usually handled reconnaissance.

In such a close-range battlefield, the sound of any blasts would serve as an alarm that couldn't be hindered, and since the unit producing them was bound to be blown away by the railguns' bombardment, it would be more economic to use the disposable self-propelled mines.

"All units—I'm sorry, but I can't individually track every self-propelled mine. But you can hear the Halcyon's voice, so use that to time your dodge—"

"Yeah. We know, Shin; you don't have to give us that warning," the Sarissa squadron's captain said.

"We're Resonating with you, so we can hear both the Halcyon's control core and the railguns. Once they start screaming, we'll know to dodge," the Fulminata squadron's captain said, nodding.

Shin blinked in surprise at them cutting him off. The other captains soon chimed in as well.

“We’ll manage somehow even without you telling us the self-propelled mines’ positions, you know. You might have forgotten, but we survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector and the large-scale offensive just fine even without you around.”

“...” Shin took a deep breath. “You’re right. Sorry.”

“You focus on your share of the work, all right...? Over and out.”

The captain punctuated the conversation with radio code, which was meaningless with the Para-RAID, since they remained connected to the Resonance. Raiden, who was running at his side, swerved his optical sensor in Shin’s direction.

“They all know how to talk for themselves, don’t they...? Anyway, both those chain shots and the self-propelled mines were things we didn’t expect. What do we do? If you’re worried about it, we could send a few of the Spearhead squadron’s people to help mop them up.”

“...No.”

Shin shook his head after pausing for thought for a moment. The other captains trusted him to complete this task, so he ought to answer that trust.

“It’s unexpected, but not something we can’t deal with. We should be fine sticking to the initial plan... Besides, the Halcyon’s not the only one.”

Shin narrowed his eyes coldly as he spoke.

“We’ve come up with our own countermeasures against it.”

“So put simply, we need to watch out and avoid sinking into the ground and slipping over the ash.”

Serving as scouts, the Reginleifs in Rito’s 2nd Battalion and Michihi’s 3rd Battalion led the charge as the Expedition Brigade’s main force battled against the Legion.

Time and again, Rito’s personal unit, Milan, had slipped and nearly toppled over from the ash. But gradually, Rito was learning how to fight on this terrain.

The Reginleifs’ posture was such that it almost seemed like they were crouching and prowling along the ground, making it very easy for their power packs’ intake holes to suck in ash. This would result in their dust filters getting clogged. In which case...

“We just have to sprint without descending to the ground!”

Milan’s white frame took to the air. Grauwolf and Löwe, with their meager sensors, relied on Ameise to serve as their eyes and ears.

Using those Ameise as footing, Milan kicked off them, landing and stamping on the Grauwolf units' rocket launcher as they turned to face it, and then approached a Löwe.

As soon as the Tank type's turret moved toward him, he evaded it by jumping in the opposite direction. In the moment when the Löwe stiffened in preparation to shoot, he lunged at the top of its turret and bombarded it from point-blank range, destroying it entirely. He didn't even regard the way it crumpled, instead turning his eyes to the next unit he would use as his footing before leaping away.

His trajectory was greatly limited midjump, and there was no cover to hide him from enemy fire in midair. So he didn't jump too high or too far. He moved in small hops on top of the Legion units dotting the battlefield, never giving them enough time to focus their sights on him.

"Aaaah...!"

Covering fire from his consort units tore into the Legion's lines. Owing to their lack of fear, which stemmed from the fact that they weren't alive, the Legion moved in to protect the more valuable Löwe and stood in Milan's path. A Grauwolf climbed on top of the Löwe that Rito was heading for. Swinging its high-frequency blade, it thrust its point forward to intercept Milan's approach...

Seeing this, Rito fired a wire anchor directly beneath him.

"Just because I'm trying not to get down to the ground doesn't mean I won't do it at all."

Reeling the wire in, he changed his trajectory to move downward, landing on the ground. At the same time, he pulled the anchor with him, smashing it onto the Grauwolf's head in a blow that packed all the kinetic energy of his fall. Its jaw (?) banged hard against the top of the Löwe's turret, and Rito made sure to kill the Grauwolf by shooting at the rocket launcher on its back. The tracer bullets, which were meant for confirming trajectory, created an induced explosion within the rocket launcher, enveloping both the Grauwolf and the Löwe in a massive blast.

Of course, Rito knew it wouldn't be realistic to assume this would be enough to destroy the Löwe. Before the flames could clear, he fired his 88 mm turret to finish the job.

Had Shin been there, he could tell him if it was necessary or not.

His lieutenant's Reginleif screeched to a halt next to his.

"Holy shit, Rito...! What was that?!"

"Cool, right?!" Rito said with a grin. "I just kinda improvised, like the cap'n and Second Lieutenant Rikka!"

"I'm gonna do it, too," his lieutenant said solemnly.

"I'm glad it's going well for you, Rito, but don't overdo it..." Michihi muttered with a smile as she watched over the 2nd Battalion's fighting.

Rito being rash and reckless was nothing new, but these stunts were something else entirely. The output of the Reginleif's actuator and power pack were high in proportion to the unit's weight, and that was what enabled it to perform those feats. But Michihi's unit, Hualien, had a firepower-suppression configuration equipped with a 40 mm autocannon. With that in mind, she wasn't keen on trying to imitate those acrobatics.

That said, the 2nd Battalion seemed to be following Rito's example. Its vanguards, as well as the fire-suppression units, began charging the Legion's lines with the same tactic. Like a pack of territorial wolves, they tore into the steely ranks and began eating their way out.

That fervor spread out to Michihi's 3rd Battalion, and before long, she could hear her squadron's snipers laughing.

"With the Legion that distracted, sniping them is easy."

"First, we shoot down the scraps that attack the vanguards, and then we prioritize the Löwe."

As the surface-suppression units standing at the back of the battalion's lines joked around, they received requests for support.

"—A new enemy force has arrived from the left and the front. Presumed to be reinforcements."

"Give us some covering fire before they regroup! Dustin, watch out for friendly fire!"

"You don't say. Roger that, Sagittarius. Don't get caught up in my crappy shooting!"

Countless rockets and explosives rained down on the relief units, mowing down Grauwolf and Ameise. The squadron that requested covering fire earlier swooped in on the Löwe from three directions. Without the support of the Ameise to provide them with sensory information, the Tank types were helpless as the Reginleifs charged them like hungry sharks.

"..."

Even a seasoned Name Bearer like Michihi had never seen such high morale and earnestness. This wasn't desperation. It was... enthusiasm. Fervor, strong enough to overwhelm her.

If the war were to end...

If they were to end the war, it would mean that the Eighty-Six would be letting go of their pride, of their own accord. But despite that...

The sound of Howitzers could be heard rumbling intermittently from the hazy, ash-leaden horizon of the Legion's frontline forces. This

was the work of the artillery battalion, which had fired from the rear under Lena's command. Standing in the back of the brigade's main force, they shot ferociously at the enemy. The Alkonost unit had gone to scout ahead, and using the data they brought back, the battalion unleashed a shower of fire and steel. In between shots, Lena's voice reached the Processors like a silver bell chiming over the Resonance.

"Vanadis to all units. There's another ash storm approaching. All units that have cut ahead, fall back for now. I'll transmit the estimated positions of the enemy group. In order to prevent friendly fire, don't shoot outside the designated range. Attack!"

The curtain of ash obstructed the range-finder lasers and optical sensors for both humanity and the Legion. The following moment, the roaring of 12.8 mm heavy machine guns, 40 mm autocannons, multi-rocket launchers, and 88 mm smoothbore guns filled the air, tearing through the ashen curtain with fire, smoke, and shock waves.

The Eighty-Six's Bloodstained Queen had predicted the correct positions through this invisible battlefield like an oracle.

"...You're all amazing, you know that?" one nearby deputy officer uttered from within his personal unit.

Michihi's response came not from pride or aspiration, but with a tone of reservation.

"Yeah...just a little."

It applied to Rito, to Dustin, and to Lena, as well as to Shin, Raiden, and Anju, who weren't on this battlefield. Seeing the fervor of her comrades, who fought as if they sought to end the war with their own hands, made Michihi feel like...she just couldn't keep up with them. Like they would just run ahead and leave her behind... But Michihi swallowed those words before they could leave her lips.

It had reached Kurena and the Trauerschwan, too. The brigade's main force consisted of four Reginleif battalions and the Myrmecoleo Regiment. Rito's 2nd Battalion and Michihi's 3rd Battalion stood at the head of the formation as scouts and were supported from behind by the Myrmecoleo's three battalions, loaded as they were with heavy firepower. Their flanks were reinforced by the Strike Package's two other battalions as a buffer, with a battalion of artillery Reginleifs in the rear.

The Trauerschwan was guarded from every direction as it awaited its role. Like a princess being guarded by her retainers—when she was, in fact, pushed away for being useless. The Trauerschwan was a hurriedly built prototype that wasn't meant for live combat. A troublesome, unwanted burden of a black swan.

Perhaps, Shin and the rest of her comrades in the Strike Package

didn't need it to begin with. After all, the decision to bring in the Trauerschwan was made after Kurena and the 1st Armored Division had been ordered to go to the Theocracy—when the Halcyon was discovered there, and it was concluded that the Noctiluca might be involved with it.

With the Halcyon, they received orders to prioritize destroying it over collecting its control core, and the research bureau loaned them the Trauerschwan to do it. Shin then entrusted Kurena with being its gunner. And yet to begin with...

...Shin and the Strike Package had already come up with a way of incapacitating gigantic Legion units like the Noctiluca and the Halcyon with nothing more than Reginleifs.



The Noctiluca's very existence came as an unexpected development during the Mirage Spire operation, but once the Strike Package had encountered it initially, it became a unit they were familiar with. And they weren't careless enough to embark on another operation without taking countermeasures for it.

There were no supercarriers in the Theocracy. They couldn't expect the Stella Maris to help them. The Strike Package needed to come up with a way of sinking the Noctiluca while relying only on their 88 mm turrets. This was something the Eighty-Six, and especially the commanders of the group, had to consider.

And so as the Strike Package's home base of Rüstkammer was buzzing with activity in preparation for their next operation, Shin, Siri, Canaan, and Suiiu, as well as the squad captains under them, met to discuss their methods.

The most valid ways of opposing a long-distance gun of that range were artillery of equal caliber or guided aircraft. But the Eighty-Six lacked the authority to decide to use them. That lay in the realm of artillery, arsenal, and military officers. And the higher-ups had already considered that and were working on acquiring these countermeasures.

It was the Strike Package's role, then, to come up with *unconventional* ways of tackling the problem.

For starters, a Feldreß had no business trying to shoot down a massive artillery gun that could reach a distance of four-hundred kilometers in a direct face-off. As soon as the railgun fired, they'd have already lost. So the first order of business was *to stop it from shooting*. They'd need to cross its four hundred kilometers of range before the railgun could even shoot them.

And if they could encroach even closer and remain within the

thirty meters of its barrel's length, it would never be able to shoot them to begin with. So long as they remained within those thirty meters of minimum range, the humongous dragon couldn't breathe its flames at them, allowing them to slay it.

They had to find a way to do that. And it was at that same time that the three armored divisions would be dispatched simultaneously, allowing them to test their proposals in live combat. Siri and the 2nd Armored Division suggested aiming at the railguns' waste-heat wings and fins. Canaan and the 3rd Armored Division focused on invading the enemy's interior through the service entrances and maintenance hatches, which they'd use before to capture the control core of Weisel and Admiral units.

And Shin and his 1st Armored Division...

"We ended up using a railgun to prioritize destroying the enemy. But honestly, we'd prefer to bust through its armor and go crazy on it. We've got Nouzen on our side, after all. He could just cut his way in with his high-frequency blades."

As the 1st Armored Division held a meeting to discuss their way of tackling the Halcyon, Claude spoke up to begin the talks. He was the captain of the Spearhead squadron's 4th Platoon. A boy with a very distinctive appearance, he had crimson hair and sharp, silver-white eyes hidden behind a pair of glasses.

It had just been decided that each armored division would tackle the situation on its own, and the 1st Armored Division's captains had met in the base's fourth meeting room. Visual and combat data on the Morpho and the Noctiluca was being projected over countless holoscreens, along with some estimated stats and...for whatever reason, a giant-monster film.

As everyone focused their gazes on him, Shin simply shrugged.

"I can understand going for a frontal assault over attacking from behind, which invites all sorts of uncertain factors into the equation. But let's agree that a countermeasure that relies on only one person who could pull it off isn't much of a countermeasure."

"You could just teach us how to pull those stunts. And we'd do our best to learn."

"If it was that easy, this guy wouldn't be the only one crazy enough to use those blades. Out of everyone, in seven years in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he was the only person to equip them, y'know?" Tohru, who was serving as the 3rd Platoon's captain in place of Theo, replied.

Coincidentally, he had blond hair and green eyes just like Theo did, but while being an Aventura, his facial features, stature, and the

air about him were all completely different.

“Well, if a small-caliber shot can’t pierce it in one go, how about we fire at the same spot repeatedly? You know, it’s, uh... What do you call it again? If you can’t hit the enemy with one arrow, pelt them with a quiver of arrows...?”

“Do you mean a *barrage* of arrows?” Michihi asked.

“Right, that. Thanks, Michihi. So yeah, we should go for that. After we hit it once, we can continue shooting at that spot. That way, we’ll eventually break through the crazy-thick armor the Noctiluca and Halcyon have.”

“Kurena’s about the only one accurate enough to pull that off,” Raiden growled. “And if only one person can do it, it’s not a valid countermeasure.”

“I think we’re on the right track, though. I mean, the Stella Maris’s main gun didn’t break through it in one shot, either; it took a few shells to tear a hole into it. It doesn’t have to be the exact same spot. We just need to focus on hitting the same area...”

“I’ve got it!” Rito exclaimed. “Why don’t we get the Halcyon’s railgun to shoot through its own armor?! I mean, a railgun would definitely work in an anti-railgun battle!”

“Great idea, Rito. We’ll go get the special bat we’ve got lying around for knocking back 800 mm shells.”

“Oh, but if the Halcyon’s even larger than the Noctiluca, we might not need to knock any shells back. Depending on the angle that it shoots at, it could knock itself off balance,” Anju suggested.

“Wait, Rito, Anju, hold up,” Raiden cut into the discussion. “This is getting messy. Let’s go over it calmly. We’ll talk about Tohru’s idea first, and then we can consider Rito’s. We need to get everything in order.”

Things were already pretty chaotic. Olivia was present in the room. He didn’t participate in the discussion actively since he wasn’t familiar with the Reginleif, but he would answer if his opinion was needed. Instead, he was sitting down and taking the minutes of the meeting, cracking an amused, sardonic smile at the conversation that developed as he rapidly typed into the information terminal.

Kurena was there, too, standing still and silent as if overwhelmed by the situation. She was desperate to suggest something... Desperate to come up with some way of helping everyone, but they were all so passionate about it, she felt like she couldn’t keep up with them. No words left her lips.

A young man in uniform, affiliated with the base’s dining hall, entered the room and placed down a tray that had some light snacks on it. Apparently, they’d skipped lunch again. They were so absorbed every day in their countermeasure meetings that they often forgot it

was mealtime. As such, the supply staff had taken to bringing light meals that the Strike Package could eat with their hands, like sandwiches and mugs full of soup.

As everyone saw the food that was being carried in, the discussion died down, and they eyed the tray fixedly.

"This is good stuff. Mine's got breaded and fried meat in it," Raiden said.

Even Shin, who Raiden often said had no sense of taste, picked up a sandwich and looked at it curiously.

"Right, it's got pickles and...mustard? I hear it's good."

"Oh, I've got cheese and simmered fig leaves."

"The soup's good, too! The flavor of the dried mushrooms is really rich."

They'd been so caught up with the meeting that they didn't realize it was well past lunchtime. Their empty stomachs caused them to ignore the meeting and instead focus on stuffing their cheeks. Seeing this, the young soldier scoffed at them.

"I'll have you know the head cook snapped at you for forgetting to eat the food he had been slaving over. He swore on his chef's honor that his cooking would get you to stop your meeting today. Feeling humbled yet, kids?"

"Sorry about that."

"Our bad."

"We're sorry."

Everyone bobbed their heads apologetically, never once putting down their utensils. The young man gave a satisfied nod.

"This is regional cuisine from the head cook's homeland... There's actually another variation on it that uses oiled herring, but it's hard to get herring during wartime. So when the war ends, he'll let you try that."

The Federacy's only port was occupied by the Legion, so naturally, they couldn't catch herring. But the mention of it made Kurena jolt. *When the war ends.* That again. Everyone kept saying that, even though such a thing was impossible.

"Oh yeah, I remember eating fish dishes when I was a kid," Tohru said to no one in particular.

Everyone fixed their eyes on him, to which he simply shrugged.

"I used to live close to the sea, so we'd cook fish a lot. It was my grandpa's best dish. Oh, he was a fisherman. There was this recipe passed down in the family for cooking them... I don't really want to go back to the Republic, but remembering that does make me a bit homesick."

Seeing his thoughtful smile only made Kurena feel more depressed. It didn't matter how nostalgic he was about it; he'd never

get to eat that dish again. Tohru's grandfather had been killed by the Republic, so they could no longer sit down to a fish dinner together.

But then Claude spoke all too nonchalantly, as if stating the obvious.

"Just make it. Once the war's over, we can go to the sea whenever we want. So do it then."

"Oh, right. Okay, then when the war ends, I'll re-create Grandpa's dish!"

"Cooking's your motivation?"

"I mean, might as well, right? We haven't decided on what we'll do after the war yet. So I figured, *Why not try it?*"

"Grandpa's taste, Mom's home cooking... Oh yeah, where did my Mom say she was from again? Maybe I'll take a trip there once the war's over."

Kurena opened her eyes wide in shock. She finally realized why Shin, Raiden, and the others could be so earnest about finding a way to stop the Halcyon.

They want to end the Legion War...and free themselves from the battlefield...



Right. Even at that point, Shin had stopped looking back at Kurena. It was like he'd left her behind and started walking off into the distance. He was caught up in ending a war that Kurena thought would never end. Occupied with figuring out how to discard the warrior's pride that Kurena clung to as her self-identity. As if trying to leave her behind.

The truth was, Shin...might have already abandoned her long ago. And that was why he didn't bring her with him to his battlefield. Maybe this was why he wouldn't call out to her now.

Because I'm useless. I couldn't shoot when I had to. Because I'm powerless, and I couldn't save Theo and Shana.

He doesn't need me anymore.

It was absurd logic, so much so that if she was even just a bit calmer, she'd realize how strange she was acting. One could only stretch common sense so far. Shin was on the front lines, facing the Halcyon at that very moment. Of course he didn't have the leisure to call her.

But Kurena lacked the composure to draw that simple conclusion. She hated feeling useless. She was afraid of being powerless. And having her own helplessness thrust before her eyes frightened her more than anything.

The color of argent hair flashed in her memories. There was a

Prussian-blue Republic uniform. Long silvery hair, and eyes of the same color.

Yes. Just like when you sat idly by and watched your parents get shot to death.

...No. That's a lie. That officer never said anything like that. He said he was sorry. He begged her for forgiveness for not being able to save them. Then who do these eyes belong to?

The white pigs are all scum.

No doubt about it. But then why didn't you stop them? Why didn't you cling to them to get in the way...? If you love your mommy and daddy so much, why did you let them get shot instead of standing up to the soldiers?

The same held true for her big sister. Kurena could have clawed at the white pigs when they came to take her to the battlefield. But she stayed quiet and did nothing. She didn't fight them. She just let them take her away.

But you didn't do it. You couldn't do it. After all... After all, you're...

The silver eyes sneered at her. No...they weren't silver. Maybe they were gold. Whose eyes were they?

That's right. After all, you're...

You're a helpless child, too powerless to oppose anything that comes your way.

"...!"

She feared people. She cowered in the face of the world. She dreaded the future. And the reason for that was clear. She knew why she was so terrified of taking even a single step forward.

It's because I'm actually powerless.

Just as she was back then, when she'd learned that she couldn't do anything.

Even if she tried to move forward, someone would simply direct their malice at her. Even if she tried to hold on to happiness, someone would be there to grab it out of her hands.

And when they did, she wouldn't be able to resist again. She'd be powerless and would simply let them take everything away again...

Kurena had been acting weird ever since "Shana's" voice became audible. This was something that had worried Lena as she commanded the brigade from her position in the corps command center.

The Sensory Resonance shared what they were hearing by linking their consciousness together, so Lena could pick up on the emotions that would be conveyed if they were talking face-to-face. And Kurena was connected to her via the Para-RAID, and she was definitely in a

restless state. She was scared, confused, and shaken. She sought someone to cling to as she curled up in fear of being abandoned.

Shin seemed to have realized that. He couldn't spare her any words, but Lena could tell that it was as if he were sneaking glances at her. Shin was in the middle of battle. He couldn't very well talk to her now. In which case...

Lena parted her lips, but then Gilwiese unexpectedly spoke up.

“Do you mind, Gunslinger? Second Lieutenant Kukumila, I believe?”

While they were both affiliated with the Federacy, this was another unit's commander and an officer she'd hardly spoken to before. For a young woman of the Eighty-Six like Kurena, this was a surprise. At the spur of the moment, she forgot to respond, but Gilwiese didn't fault her for it and continued:

“I've heard of your reputation, Gunslinger. You'd survived the deadly Eighty-Sixth Sector and supported the Strike Package on its many martial endeavors. An unrivaled Eighty-Six sniper... And it's because I've heard of your reputation that I *didn't* want you to serve as the Trauerschwan's gunner.”

The sound of someone swallowing nervously could be heard through the radio. It was probably Kurena herself, hearing her own voice with startling clarity. She held her breath, not out of fright, but like how a child might react when having his failings pointed out.

“I've heard of your failure during the Mirage Spire operation, and I decided you cannot be trusted with this. A warrior who freezes up at the critical moments doesn't count as a soldier. I couldn't afford for you to stand still when the time comes to shoot.”

Soldiers, much like weapons, are only seen as effective when they work whenever put to use. And they were dealing with a prototype weapon that wasn't seen as reliable to begin with. Gilwiese went as far as to ask Shin and Lena to remove Kurena from the operation altogether. But the one to sternly refuse his request...

“But he still insisted that we entrust you with the Trauerschwan. Captain Nouzen insisted on it.”



The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. The unit made up of the forsaken people of the Republic, the Eighty-Six. Gilwiese heard that it was led by a “Nouzen” of mixed blood. And when he did, he'd felt an odd sense of affinity toward this boy. He hadn't so much as met him yet, and this emotion was very much one-sided. But he still felt that way.

Had that warrior family acknowledged Shin as one of their own, they wouldn't have left him to lead a unit of common riffraff. And if so, Gilwiese could see him as the same as the Myrmecoleo Regiment. A crossbreed rejected by his house—a convenient tool to be used, only so that his achievements might be held up in his family's favor.

A lion head with an ant's body—a creature fated to starve to death because it could not consume the prey it hunted.

A child without a place to belong to, without anyone to love him.

But Gilwiese was wrong about Shin.

“This weapon was loaned to us by the Senior Research Institute for the sake of this joint operation. And I won't say that for this reason, the authority to decide which of our subordinates will serve as its gunner falls squarely on me.”

They were in an octagonal, pearl-gray meeting room in one of the Theocracy's frontline bases. Milky-white tubes that let off a prismatic sheen covered the walls. Shin stood on the other side of this unfamiliarly designed room, gazing back at Gilwiese as he spoke.

“Even so, if you're saying that we should be giving up on her because of one blunder, I have to say that your attitude as a commander is far too callous. If you were to discard any soldier for a single mistake they made, you wouldn't be able to maintain a unit. Second Lieutenant Kukumila faltered in the previous operation; that much is true. But I don't think you have any reason to conclude that she won't get back on her feet.”

You don't have the right to assume she won't recover.

“And if she fails again?” Gilwiese asked, suppressing the bitter emotions bubbling up in his own heart.

The Myrmecoleo Regiment was a newly formed unit. They didn't have any failures to their name because they had no combat experience to begin with. They were by far the most unreliable ones here. Shin and his group, with their seven years of combat experience, could have thrust that fact in his face, and Gilwiese would not have been in a position to retort.

But they didn't. And it wasn't because Shin wasn't aware of the facts. If he wasn't that smart, he wouldn't have survived his battles against the Legion, and the seasoned Eighty-Six wouldn't follow his orders. In which case, the only reason he didn't mention it was because he thought doing so would be cowardly. The standard—or perhaps pride—he'd set for himself wouldn't allow him to do something so despicable.

It was his nobility that prevented him from doing that. And so, he looked up at Gilwiese with the same bloodred eyes as his own.

A mix of Onyx and Pyrope blood—a joining of people that was intensely frowned on in the Empire. And Shin's appearance was the

very picture of Imperial nobility, which had likely led to him being greatly discriminated against among the people of the Eighty-Six Sector as well. Meanwhile, the Republic, which was his motherland, despised him for being a filthy stain of an Eighty-Six.

And yet this noble Imperial half-breed, this Eighty-Six boy, didn't show any signs of resenting all that hatred as he gazed back at Gilwiese.

"If that happens, I'll deal with her mistake and regain control of the situation. Taking measures to cover for a subordinate's failings is the responsibility of a commander."

His tone was firm, but lacking in venom. It was as if he'd naturally thought that it was his duty to grant his comrades as many chances to redeem themselves as they needed, while covering for them no matter what.

Lena was also present in the conversation, but she remained silent. This, too, was her show of trust. Both for Shin, and for Kurena, who wasn't present. Both Lena and Shin believed that Kurena would redeem herself—even though she'd made a fatal, pathetic blunder in the previous operation and damaged their trust in her.

Seeing this stirred up odd emotions within Gilwiese. If only he'd had someone like that... Someone who would cover for, protect, and believe in him. Like a brother or a sister...

And after years spent longing for such a healthy, trusting relationship, he could not, in good faith, spit in the face of theirs.

"Understood. If you'd go that far to vouch for her...I'll respect your decision."



Gilwiese continued speaking, thinking back to the loneliness and the tinge of shame he'd felt back then. Kurena seemed to be terrified on the other end of the radio. The look in her eyes was that much more familiar than that of Shin, who had the exact same eye color as he did.

"Captain Nouzen left that trump card in your hands because he believed that you'd get back on your feet. He entrusted it with you because he believed that you are not powerless."

She had the eyes of a child who had been beaten so hard that her will to resist had completely broken. Of an infant who had internalized and etched their powerlessness into the very depths of their heart. He knew that gaze. He'd seen it time and again within the shut-off halls of the Brantolote estate.

She was like a mirror to him. A mirror that he hated—that reflected things he didn't wish to see.

"And you have a duty to answer that faith. If someone believes in

you, and you believe in them, too, you need to answer their faith. People like that... They're so much harder to come by than you could ever imagine."

Please answer them. Because you were graced with a rare breed of luck, with the precious privilege of meeting people like them. I had no one like that. No one would believe in me like that or watch out for me like that. No one to wait for me to get back on my feet.

You only ever get one chance at life, and since we missed it before we were ever born, no one spares a passing glance for us. The one thing that we ever wanted, that we ever aspired for, was snatched away before we even had the chance to reach out and grab it.

But that's not the same for you. You have people who believe in you. If you have a wish, they'll do their best to grant it. So believe in them. You might not see it right now, but their hands are extended to you even now.

Please. Don't take that for granted.

"So you have to get back on your feet, Second Lieutenant Kukumila."

Even though I couldn't. Even though I still can't.

"You have people who believe in you, who are waiting for you to get back up. So do it one more time. Do it every single time. Answer their call. You can help them... Get back up."

So you don't end up like me.

Without realizing it, the mention of Shin's name and the sound of those words made a shiver run down Kurena's spine. She realized that he hadn't given up on her. And not just that. He had no intention of abandoning her even if she did fail. That in and of itself shook her, but it wasn't all.

She didn't want to be powerless. She wanted to fight. To be by his side.

That was how she felt at the very beginning, but it was more than just that now.



"Hmm... Uh..."

Kurena was about to raise an earnest question. They stood on the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield, in a base surrounded by minefields. It was just after she'd been appointed to the squad under the command of this boy who was called the Reaper.

She looked at his face, which was still unfamiliar at the time. Even as she feared that her feelings might come across, some part of her hoped so very slightly that they would.

“Didn’t it...hurt?”

“...?”

She didn’t specify what she meant, and Shin was understandably taken aback by the question. His surprise was hard to discern from his expression; she could only see it because she was right in front of him. But it was the first time that Kurena saw this stone-faced captain act like a boy his age. And that was enough to let everything really click into place for her.

He was just a boy, only one year her senior, and barely halfway into his teens.

“Didn’t shooting Jute yesterday hurt you, Captain Nouzen?”

As he caressed Jute’s cheeks, his hands stained with the blood and viscera of a friend, he didn’t so much as bat an eye. And just like a heartless reaper, he indifferently, calmly pulled the trigger.

“Are you just hiding it...when it really hurts...?”

For one long moment, Shin fell silent. As if contemplating whether to share what he’d been harboring with this small girl standing before him. But then he said:

“...Just a little.”

“...Right. Right, yeah, I guess it would...”

Of course it hurt. But knowing this made Kurena feel somehow relieved. In that case...

“I could do it for you next time.”

He blinked his bloodred eyes again. But by now, that color didn’t scare her. Looking up into his eyes, Kurena spoke vehemently.

“I’m really good with a gun, you know? If it’s from that close, I’d never miss my mark. So...I could do it for you.”

In your stead.

Remembering them... Carrying them with you is probably something only you can do. Because you’re stronger than any of us. But I can share that pain... I could shoulder a bit of your burden. If you’d only let me.

She felt her fingers begin to shiver, so she clenched her fists hard to hide it. She was afraid. Of shooting those who couldn’t die, those who couldn’t be saved, so they wouldn’t have to be integrated into the Legion. One could call that mercy, but even still, it meant killing another human being. It scared her. She didn’t want to have to do it. But that was exactly why she couldn’t let him carry that burden alone.

Shin looked at her silently, and then he shook his head.

“I’m the one who made that promise with them... So I think I should be the one to do it.”

“...Right...”

Kurena dropped her shoulders. The fact that this gave her a modicum of comfort made her feel ashamed of herself. However, as the Reaper looked back at Kurena...for the first time, he smiled in her

presence.

“But...thank you.”



Right... At the time, she didn't tell him that or polish her skill as a sniper so she could be useful to him or stay by his side. It was so she could fight with him until the very end, even if that “end” was her death. So that when the mantle of Reaper became too heavy to bear, she could pick it up in his stead. So that she could...help him, even the tiniest bit.

He was something like family, like a brother to her, though they weren't bound by blood. He was her precious...brother in arms.

Captain Nouzen will always be an older brother to you. That will never change.

It was Lieutenant Esther from the Fleet Countries who had told her that. She was someone who had lived holding on to pride—just as they had—and was deprived of even that in the end. And she was right; Kurena's relationship with Shin didn't change. Shin didn't turn his back on her. He'd said it before the operation, too, with his eyes full of concern. He said that he wouldn't abandon her. That she didn't have to carry that burden if it ended up becoming a curse.

He had sympathized with her pain. If she were to just focus on it, she could feel his emotions even now, through the Para-RAID.

The Resonance didn't just transmit words; it let one feel the same vicissitudes of emotion that one might pick up on when talking to another face-to-face. And not just Shin, but Raiden, Anju, and Lena were all worried about her.

And in doubting herself, she'd very nearly hurt them.

“Major Günter, umm... Thank you.”

The Halcyon relied on the self-propelled mines' trigger in order to align its sights, and it seemed the five diversionary squadrons were beginning to use this to their advantage. The destructive marks of the five railguns' chain shots were clearly missing the positions the squadrons were occupying.

They'd fought within ruins before because of their experience in the Eighty-Sixth Sector and the Federacy; as such, they knew to pass the self-propelled mines by and shoot them from a safe distance, and in so doing, they diverted the railguns' aim. Under Zashya's command from above, the five railguns only ended up creating rubble that offered more cover to hide the Reginleifs from the weapons' own fire.

At long last, the Halcyon's black-metal back came into view from

beyond the thicket of buildings and the hills of streets. By relying on the five squadrons' diversion and drawing a wide arc to go around the ruins, the Spearhead squadron finally reached the point behind the Halcyon's back.

They spread out behind the cover of the many buildings that stood half collapsed around the Halcyon.

"All battalions, come in. The Spearhead squadron is in position."

"Roger that. Quarrel and Archer are also in position. We're ready to offer covering fire whenever."

"The Scythe squadron as well as all diversion squadrons are beginning to approach the enemy. Remaining distance is roughly two thousand. We're in a tank turret's range."

The Scythe squadron's captain smiled with sweet pride.

"It's about time, then... Let's show it what we're made of!"

"Right."

The Halcyon may have lorded over this place, like a sovereign sitting upon its throne, but...

"Let's teach it that this is the Strike Package's—the *Reginleif's* battlefield."



After their meal, the head cook himself walked in with a smile, carrying mugs of coffee full of cream and sugar. Once the group finished the coffee, they finally resumed the discussion on how to deal with the Halcyon. Maybe it was their heightened blood-sugar levels or the refreshing effects of the break, but they soon realized their discussion was hitting a dead end. After all, they had gotten quite off track.

"Let's get back to the topic at hand, then," Shin said, drawing everyone's gaze to him. "We can't beat it in an artillery fight. So we're going to have to close the distance before it prepares to shoot, before it can even notice us. Using the *Armée Furieuse* should make that part easier... If this turns into another naval battle, we'll just have to pray there won't be a storm like last time."

"...Even during the naval battle, we had to climb up to the bastard before we could even do anything, so we'll have to figure that out," Raiden said, nodding. "Reginleifs can't run on the water, you know."

Shin nodded back before continuing:

"The next operation should be a surface operation, though, so I don't think it'll be any more complicated than fighting the Morpho. At the time, the enemy's defense unit kept whittling down our forces, so it ended up being a one-on-one in the end. But if we can cross the

enemy's territory through the air, we should be able to reach the railgun without losing our forces. The railgun itself isn't that agile, so it's almost a sitting duck. Climbing up on top of it shouldn't be that difficult."

The first time they'd faced a railgun-equipped Legion was one year ago, in Kreutzbeck City. Having successfully ambushed Shin and the Nordlicht squadron, the Morpho retreated after firing at them, without paying any heed to how successful its shot was.

At that point, the Nordlicht squadron's fifteen units were all intact. And within those city ruins, there were plenty of towering buildings around the Morpho. That was why it chose to run. It knew that fighting alone against multiple Feldreß in an urban environment put it at a disadvantage, and that was the reason why the gigantic Legion artillery unit decided to retreat from Kreutzbeck City.

"...Right."

"Earlier, when you mentioned the barrage... You said that based on the premise of us getting into the thirty-meter range where the railguns wouldn't be able to shoot us. In other words, you're saying that we'd be close enough to latch on to it. Not that we'd be trying to shoot at it from afar, right?"

The other Processors raised their voices in realization. They had a weapon like that. A weapon that could hit the same point with laser accuracy, without hurting the Processors.

One of a Regineif's fixed armaments, this weapon was only useful when it was attached to the enemy, but so long as it was, it would be able to hit its target accurately and powerfully.

"The pile drivers!"



The five squadrons approached the Halcyon while distracting its railguns. Closing the range to a few hundred meters, they darted between buildings and rubble like arrows as they approached it.

The 800 mm caliber cannons creaked as they turned in place to intercept the targets racing along the ground. In addition, antiair autocannons deployed all over the Halcyon's body, like a porcupine's quills standing on end.

"We figured you'd do that, idiot!"

The next moment, pale shadows appeared on top of the nearby high-rise buildings, aiming at the autocannons from their blind spot as if to mock the very idea of using them. Having remained at a location where the Halcyon couldn't see them, this group of Regineifs fired

their wire anchors near the rooftops and reeled them in, drawing an arc to climb up. These were the Quarrel and Archer platoons, which were equipped with Howitzer configurations for artillery support.

Reginleifs were designed to fight on the Federacy's battlefields, in forested or urban terrains. Most other mobile weapons struggled on urban ground. Their thick armor and high-caliber, heavy tank turrets made it difficult for them to move. By contrast, Reginleifs excelled at three-dimensional combat while using high buildings for footing.

That was why that army of skeletons was given their agility and high output. They appeared in the city's peak, in the heart of the one battlefield where they stood unrivaled. And from there, they could aim at the single weak point that all armored weapons shared: their relatively thinly protected top armor.

This was why this group had crawled upon the ground the whole way there, so that they could now attack from above.

"We stayed low to the ground to condition you to fix your eyes on us. That was our plan all along, and you fell for it, hook, line, and sinker!"

And with that sneering remark, they fired. The antiair autocannons that the Halcyon was equipped with for close-range interception were blown away, helpless to resist as they were fixed fruitlessly to the ground.

The five squadrons approaching the Halcyon took advantage of its diverted attention, changing their ammunition and opening fire as well. The rush of high explosives entered the 800 mm aperture between one pair of rails and triggered their timed fuse. This was the same feat that Theo had used in the battle of the Noctiluca to stop it from firing. At that moment, a HEAT projectile *accidentally* went off as it touched the rails. But this time, the squadrons used high explosives with a larger blast radius and a fuse timed to trigger inside the barrel. By aiming right between the rails at a short range, they were able to produce the same result.

The liquid metal that served as the electrode that powered and propelled the shells splashed into the sky, going off in a blast of fragments that went flying at a velocity of eight thousand meters per second. The huge gun was pushed back, as if retreating. Meanwhile, the remaining platoons of the five squadrons advanced.

Remaining distance: thirty meters.

They'd plunged into the railguns' blind spot. With their barrels being thirty meters long, they couldn't possibly fire into this range. Launching their wire anchors to rapidly climb up the nearby buildings and kicking against the Halcyon's flank, the ivory silhouettes quickly moved toward the five turrets. As their massive enemy shuffled its feet and trembled in a furious attempt to shake them off, they triggered

three of their four pile drivers, thrusting them into the Halcyon's armor in an attempt to hang on.

Like all the last times, the railguns unfurled the conductive wires from their respective pairs of wings, some of them thrusting them from below like geysers in an attempt to intercept the Reginleifs. But the Quarrel and Archer squadrons forestalled this attack, firing high-explosive shells into the air that knocked the wires back with their intense shock waves and clearing the way for their comrades.

Shielded by the invisible pressure of those blasts, the Reginleifs began reaching the top of the five railguns. Thrusting their 88 mm turrets at it at point-blank range, they opened fire.

They shot APFSDS (Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding Sabot) shells with their initial velocity of one thousand six hundred meters per second perfectly retained...which were deflected by the Halcyon's armor in a shower of sparks. It was hard. Unlike the Löwe or Dinosauria, this wasn't a model that required much mobility. Even if it meant an increase in weight, its turrets' armor was reinforced.

This was, however, something the Strike Package anticipated might happen.

They changed their armament selection to their front right leg's main armament, a 57 mm anti-armor pile bunker. Of the four pile drivers they had on all four legs, they'd kept one unused when climbing up.

They couldn't develop a new armament from scratch in such a short period of time, but they did manage to cobble up an impromptu new weapon based off an existing one. They were lucky enough to have the spare parts for it. After all, with only one Processor out of the whole unit using *this* weapon, they had plenty to work with.

Trigger. Their front right leg's pile driver activated. And immediately after the pile driver went off, the *high-frequency blade* fixed to the outer side of the pile bunker's case, facing downward, was blown off by the explosive bolt. It followed a guideline that was also connected to the cover. Its tip slid down toward the turret's armor.

The red-hot edge of the high-frequency blade dipped into the thick armor like water. It slashed its way in, and without even confirming the damage, the Reginleifs purged the blades and the pile drivers altogether. The moment the Reginleifs jumped off, wires were fired from behind the shield of the blasts, lashing out at the turret. Even with that impact, the blades had dug in too deeply to be dislodged.

Meanwhile, the pile drivers themselves came off as if they'd been flicked away, and without anything to hold them in place, the drivers lurched sideways. It wasn't unlike the pila used by the soldiers of an ancient empire to render the shields of enemy soldiers useless. The

drivers bent much like the pilum, applying pressure to the shank that was holding the high-frequency blade in place and pushing it deeper into the turrets' armor... That wasn't something the Processors anticipated, though.

"Maybe we can modify it to intentionally cause this," Shin wondered aloud.

"It'd be nice if we could do that... The bigger the hole, the easier it is to aim at!"

The high-frequency blades were pushed down to the point of being perpendicular to the ground, until finally, they popped out the other side and fell down, leaving behind long slashes that reached into the turrets' inner mechanisms. It was as if some gigantic beast had run its claws through each turret.

Once again, the Reginleifs fixed their 88 mm guns onto the turrets. All of them, from those that jumped away, to those that climbed up the Halcyon using their wire anchors, to those that remained on the ground to offer covering fire.

All of them pulled their triggers at once.

Having confirmed that the Halcyon's autocannons were gone and all five of its railguns had been prevented from firing, the Spearhead squadron lunged forward from its hiding spot. As the Halcyon writhed and shook furiously at the blades that had been thrust into its turrets, Undertaker jumped onto its back, thrusting all four blades into it. Because the Halcyon's deployment holes were used as exits for self-propelled mines, traps could be easily placed inside them; thus, Shin avoided infiltrating through there.

Swinging the high-frequency blade attached to his grappling arm, he slashed into the behemoth's thick carapace. The next moment, Olivia's Anna Maria scaled its way up as well, bringing its high-frequency lance down onto the two cracks that had been carved into the Halcyon's armor with deadly accuracy. In order to make doubly sure the plan would work, Shin retracted one of his forelegs' piles and thrust it in again, triggering it.

The armor bent in a distorted, triangular shape and then collapsed inward. As their two units jumped away to make room, Raiden's Wehrwolf and Claude's Bandersnatch fired their autocannons into the hole. Tracer bullets, meant for confirming the shots' trajectory, left a glowing trail as they whizzed through the air, casting a momentary light into the dark reaches of the Halcyon's internal structure.

Right below the five railguns stood something that looked like a massive tower. It was a magazine, much like the one used by the Stella Maris's 40 cm cannon. A large recycling furnace accompanied it,

consuming wreckage and debris to put them to use again. It had a cultivation tank filled with silver fluid—Liquid Micromachines—as well as a storage tank.

There was also a great number of machines and plumbing inside it. Shin wasn't knowledgeable about the intricacies of producing ammunition, so he didn't know what they were supposed to do. To him, it looked indeed like the mechanical bowels of a gigantic animal.

He looked around for something that could be its control core but didn't find anything that fit the bill. At this close range, Shin could detect it even without his sense of sight—his ability picked up on it, allowing him to *hear* it.

The overlapping screams of multiple Shepherds were distributed unevenly inside its internal mechanisms. Each scream—no, perhaps entire individuals were divided—emanated from a different spot. A micromachine nerve network spread all throughout the mechanical entrails like a thin curtain.

Unlike the Weisel, which were hidden deep within the Legion's territories and weren't built for combat, the Halcyon was a Legion unit made for battle. And being as large as it was, splitting its central processor increased redundancy. The Halcyon was capable of producing Liquid Micromachines on its own, so even if it took some damage to its central processor, it would be capable of repairing it on the spot. What's more, the Reginleif's tank turret and Howitzer were relatively weak, and while they could theoretically destroy the nerve network, doing so would prove quite difficult.

In the end, they'd need to rely on the Trauerschwan's bombardment after all.

And to do that...

"Aim at its legs! Anju, we're counting on you!"

In preparation for the bombardment of the railguns, the Reginleifs had set their ammunition to HEAT shells. Their high-temperature metal jet billowed mercilessly into the claw marks left by the blade-piles, setting fire to the Liquid Micromachines that made up the massive turrets' control cores.

Shiden could see some metal butterflies soaring from one of the guns, Johanna. She'd seen it before, even during the Noctiluca's battle; it was the sight of a control core's flight in an attempt to escape flames and destruction. The Liquid Micromachines had turned to a flock of countless silvery butterflies.

These were Johanna's—Shana's—control core.

"You're not getting away!"

With a furious roar, she climbed up Johanna's burning turret. For

this battle, she'd exchanged the buckshot cannon on her gun mount arm for an 88 mm tank turret. Setting the timed fuses on her HEAT shells, she fixed her sights on the silvery butterflies spreading out into the ashen sky—

“No good, missy! Get down from there!”

A moment after Bernholdt's warning reached her, a proximity alert began blaring in her ears. Coming to, she saw an electric wire swing down on her, its five claws moving in a trajectory to slice her unit up. In her fervent attempt to prevent Shana from escaping, she'd neglected to mind her surroundings. And now it was too late for her to dodge.

God dammit. They caught me... It was bait.

Using a comrade's corpse to draw in its allies was one of the oldest tricks in the book. Far be it from her to guess whether or not the hunks of scrap metal did it intentionally, but the end result was the same. They had lured her in.

Or maybe Shana just wants to take me down with her...

But she snapped out of that bittersweet daydream when a HEAT shell flew in from below, bursting in midair in a rumbling explosion. The blast's shock waves knocked the wire back, and as Shiden stood dumbfounded for a moment, a Reginleif scrambled up the turret and rammed Cyclops, sending both of them plummeting down.

The Reginleif's squadron symbol was that of a wolf dog accompanying a war god, and its ID number was 01. Freki One. Bernholdt's unit.

“I swear, this girl's such a handful! You'll be getting some complaints from me when we're done here, Captain!”

As Cyclops fell, Shiden looked ahead and found the identity of the one who'd fired that HEAT shell. The one rig with brown plating in the airborne unit, shaped like a quadruped animal—a Stollenwurm. Olivia's Anna Maria. Using his ability to briefly peer into the future, he'd foreseen Shiden's predicament.

She was suddenly overcome with anger and raised her voice in rage.

Right now, I was so close—this close—to joining Shana, who'd died ahead of me.

“Stay the fuck out of my way, Bernholdt! You too, Captain!”

“We're the ones who should be saying that, Second Lieutenant.”

Shiden was stunned into silence. That remark cut into her outburst like the cracking of a whip. That casual but somehow firm voice... Was that Olivia?

“Your task is to suppress the railgun. You volunteered for this task, which means you have to see it through to the end. If you're

keener on having a lovers' suicide with that railgun instead, then you're an impediment and liability to this operation. Step down."

Occupied with giving Anju instructions, Shin was too late to act in the heat of the moment. As he made room for Snow Witch, he turned his eyes just as Anna Maria rescued Cyclops.

"Thank you, Captain. You saved her."

"I keep my 'eyes' open to remain wary of unexpected developments, but it's a good thing I was nearby. I just barely managed to do it."

Olivia's ability to see three seconds into the future only extended a few dozen meters around him. It wasn't very wide. Olivia then cracked a smile.

"With what happened to Second Lieutenant Rikka, I can understand your desire to minimize losses. But you don't have to shoulder that burden all on your own. Besides, protecting poorly behaved brats is an adult's responsibility. Let me take care of that, if you will."

"...Thank you."

Next to him, Snow Witch rose from its standby position, loaded with the heaviest of the Reginleif's primary armaments, the missile launcher. It switched places with Bandersnatch and set its targets. As soon as it was finished, it fired all its ammunition at once.

Twenty missiles went flying into the Halcyon's insides. These were anti-light-armor missiles, meant for Ameise or Grauwolf. They weren't very effective against Löwe, Dinosauria, or Morpho. Even if the missiles had landed a direct hit, this was a gigantic ammunition factory that produced unusually large 800 mm shells. They wouldn't deal any crippling damage.

However...

As the missiles scattered inside the factory, they detonated, unleashing a blinding barrage of self-forging fragments. The explosives produced by those fragments burst into countless small eruptions.

The explosives went off, granting the self-forging fragments a speed of three thousand meters per second. Tongues of crimson flame roared to life through the factory's interior. The tall, airtight walls here didn't allow the flames any opening to escape outside.

Seeing that one barrage wasn't enough, Snow Witch gave way to another surface-suppression unit, which promptly fired its own missiles into the Halcyon. Then a third unit fired as well, as if to make doubly sure they got the job done.

Before long, the high temperatures of the flames exceeded what the Halcyon's massive heat sinks could handle. Even the railguns'

twenty cooling wings couldn't expel the heat fast enough. All the Halcyon's parts, from its high-temperature energy packs, to the railguns and their reloading systems, and eventually even the control cores unevenly distributed within began to overheat.

And so did the artificial muscles of its legs, which grew hot whenever the Halcyon moved, supporting its weight and allowing it to walk.

And...

Shiden could only hear the Legion because she was connected to Shin and his ability through the Para-RAID. Now that he was right next to the Halcyon, its howls and screams were exceptionally loud.

Groans, shrieks, whispers of resentment, and screams of terror. And also, Shana's moans, circling above in their attempt to escape the flames.

With the help of the Archer squadron, the Nordlicht squadron fired blasts all around Shana, funneling the brittle, flammable butterflies into a small area. They were driving it right in front of where Cyclops stood still, so it was clear that they were trying to help her.

The moans rained down on Shiden. Now that Shana had split into butterflies, her voice was less of a loud howl and more of a faint whisper.

So cold.

If she were to shoot Shana now, when the entirety of her being had been reduced to those two words, she really would disappear. Shana would truly be lost forever. And Shiden had nothing left. No family or hometown. No culture to inherit, no ethnic heritage to fall back on. No future to dream of or a clear vision of how the present ought to be.

Many other Eighty-Six were in the same boat. But Shiden had always thought she'd manage somehow, one way or another. So long as she had Shana and the members of the Brisingamen squadron, who had been with her in the Eighty-Sixth Sector and beyond, she would find a way to persevere.

But now that day would never come.

Because it's not that you think it's fine to die that way. You want to die that way.

Shin's voice drifted through her memories. He'd said that back in the Theocracy's unfamiliar, pearl-gray base. A place that, despite being a military facility, had a sterilized scent to it, as if rejecting the dirty, metallic smell of the army. In that moment, the Reaper really had seen Shiden's heart, as well as the morbid wish she'd kept hidden.

He was someone who once harbored that same desire. Who had lost sight of how to live for the sake of fulfilling that wish. And so seeing Shiden wish for destruction the same way he had...annoyed him. It was enough to make him want to drag her from the precipice of death, even if she kicked and screamed the whole time.

I won't take someone with that kind of attitude with me.

Yeah. That's right. That's why I threw that attitude away. But what am I supposed to do now? Even if I give up on my wish to die while taking her down with me, how am I supposed to live without her? Without the rest of them?

Those were words she'd never share with Shin. She knew how pathetic they were, and the shame of it all meant she could never let Shin know how she truly felt.

And so she asked. Someone who was present next to her but wasn't an Eighty-Six. Someone older, who wouldn't laugh at her or act confused but would answer her question.

“...Hey.”

“...Hey. Captain Olivia. Can I ask you something?”

It was a personal Para-RAID Resonance, which was seen as inappropriate in the middle of an operation. But rather than scold her for it, Olivia simply frowned. The way this brusque young woman seemed to ask the question, as if begging for his assistance, made him realize she really was still a girl in her teens.

“What would you do if you were me? What if you ran into your person on the battlefield? What if you couldn't defeat her without risking your life...? If you could die together with her?”

For a long moment, Olivia remained silent. His person. In his case, it was his fiancée. She was a victim of the Legion War, and she very well could have been assimilated. She could be wandering still as a Shepherd, somewhere out on the battlefield.

“Well, I'd fight. I'd risk my life, like you said... But I wouldn't die.”

How sweet it would be if he could die while putting her to rest. If that could be how things ended. It would be such a beautiful, poetic, intoxicating conclusion... As comforting and inviting as corruption.

“...Why wouldn't you die?”

“Anna's parents are still waiting for her to come home. In front of her empty grave. I have to let them know how it ends.”

If they were to blame him for not keeping her safe, he wouldn't be able to fault them for it. But they didn't. They were happy to see him visit her grave every year, on the anniversary of her death and on her birthday. But they had also asked him to forget about her.

They were too kind to him. He owed it to them to make that report.

“I have to protect the homeland she loved, and I can’t, in good faith, say I’ve done that until all the Legion are gone. I have to reclaim the scenery she loved... And besides...”

And indeed, most importantly.

“...if I defeat her, I’ll finally...be allowed to weep at her grave.”

During his fiancée’s—Anna Maria’s—funeral, Olivia didn’t cry. He wanted to, but he didn’t. He couldn’t shed a single tear. Because she wasn’t there. Those abominable scrap-metal demons took her away. So she hadn’t truly been put to rest, and shedding tears for her now wouldn’t be right.

“I need to offer her flowers and shed my tears appropriately, on every birthday and every memorial. Every year, until my time comes... So I can’t die yet. Not until I’ve done that.”

Would he find a new love in the years to come, as her parents hoped he would? Would he meet someone new? Olivia didn’t know yet. Maybe it would happen. Maybe it wouldn’t.

But he would still bring her flowers every year. He wouldn’t forget Anna Maria for as long as he lived. So for now—at least for her sake, he would live on.

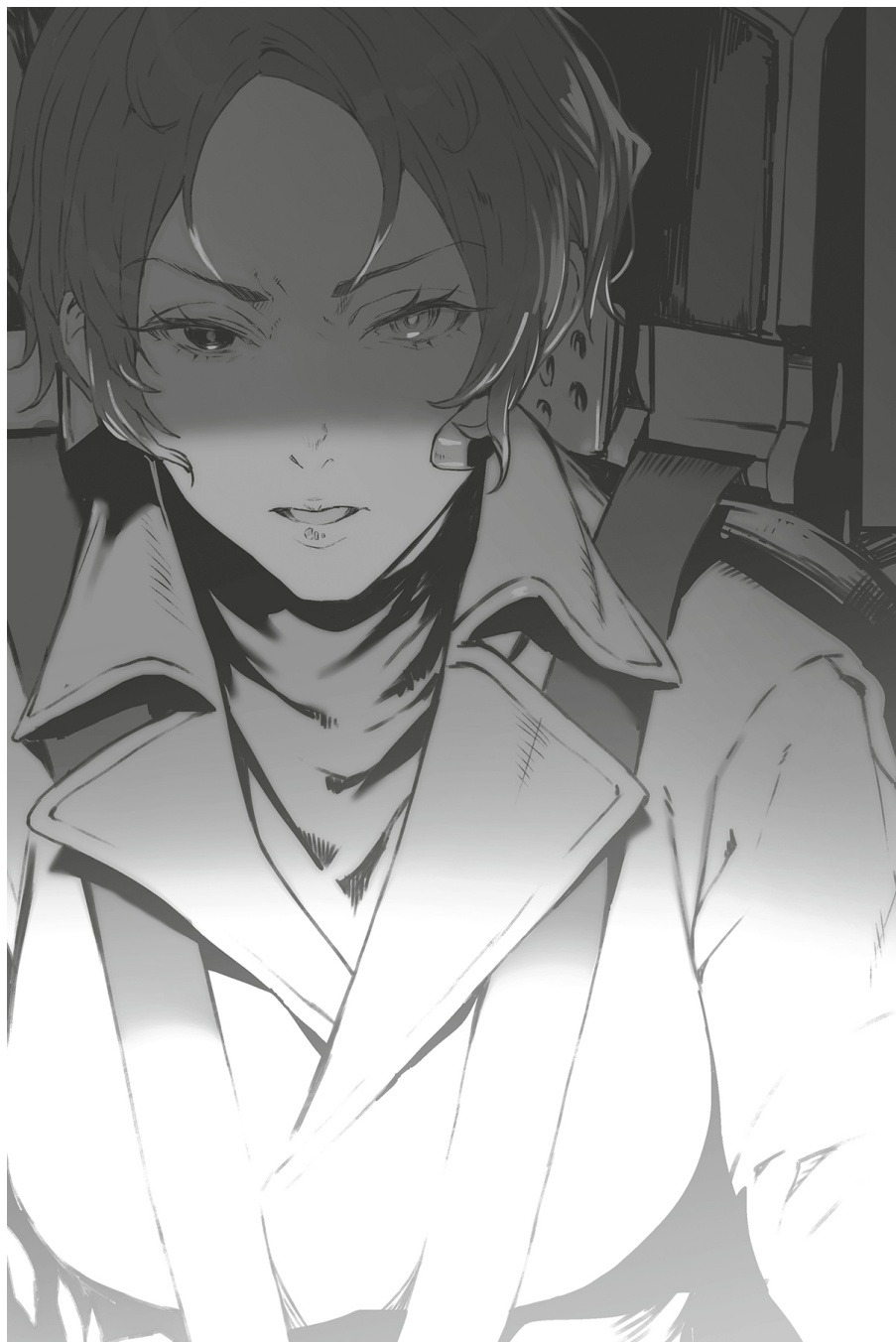
Shiden smiled ever so slightly.

“Right. I getcha.”

Nodding, Shiden fixed the 88 mm smoothbore gun’s sights on Shana.

That’s right, Shana. I haven’t buried you, and I haven’t visited your grave yet, either. So all of us who survived—maybe we could meet up every year on the day of that operation, so we can drink and cheer for you. But right now, we can’t really do that, either.

Would that be enough? Shin couldn’t forgive himself with just that, and that was why he’d stood frozen in place when she saw him on the battlefield one year ago. When he’d wished he could disappear into the battlefield that had consumed someone he held dear.



But the Reaper escaped that hell. So she had to find a way out, too. After all, if that idiot could pull it off, there's no way in hell she couldn't do it, too.

"See ya, Shana."

All her comrades who had died before she did.

Her parents, who'd died in the internment camps.

Her younger sister, whom she'd failed to protect.

She, who had been trapped in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

See ya.

I'm not gonna forget any of you. You won't be holding me back anymore.

She pulled the trigger.

With their control cores burned, the five railguns' turrets slumped to the ground, like animals that'd had their necks snapped. The heat of the flames eating away at the Halcyon from the inside exceeded its temperature limit, forcing its propulsion system into emergency shutdown.

This was their first phase in the plan to destroy the Halcyon. The airborne unit's task. To break the Halcyon's legs and crush its fangs—the railguns—before humanity's trump card, the Trauerschwan, was in position to shoot.

And they did it. Its cannons had been burned away, and its artificial muscles couldn't support its weight. The gigantic behemoth crumpled to the ground in a loud, thundering quake.

INTERLUDE

TO KNOW HOW TO KILL SIEGFRIED, ONE MUST...

“Hello.”

The military hospital in the Federacy’s capital city of Sankt Jeder was relatively far from the Rüstammer base. Despite that, Annette peeked her head into the hospital ward, prompting Theo and the other Eighty-Six boys hospitalized there to blink in surprise.

A refreshing breeze, cool but not quite freezing, blew into the room through the window, which had been opened a crack. The gray autumn sky seemed to blend in perfectly with the thin glass window.

As their bodies recovered, the boys regained their stamina, leaving them bored and restless for lack of things to do. Many of Theo’s roommates decided to read complicated books or catch up on their homework. The Eighty-Six in the bed next to his was chatting with a child who’d peered inside, looking for someone else. Theo wasn’t keen on talking to anyone, so he didn’t even look at the kid.

For some reason, Theo felt like his mind was occupied by a white void that nothing could fill. It’d made him vacant and absentminded before he realized it. He was as bored as the rest of them, but for some reason, it didn’t occur to him to pass the time somehow.

He’d been like that ever since he returned to the Federacy. When Shin and Ishmael came to visit him, he had the time to ponder on how to go about his life now. But upon returning to the Federacy, he’d lost all his spirit. Maybe he just didn’t want to look pathetic in front of those two, and after coming here, he’d finally depleted the mental prowess he used to keep himself roused.

That child didn’t know him and naturally didn’t know his

circumstances, so he didn't want to speak to him. Instead, he leveled his gaze on Annette and asked:

"...What?"

"Yo. I figured you'd be getting bored right about now. So since I was passing by, I figured I'd get some movies or cartoons that you could all watch together."

She opened her tote bag in front of the large shared television. It was full of media data. The boys shuffled around her, raising their voices in elated cheers.

"Dammit, Annette, are you an angel? Did God send you or something?"

"This helps so much—we've been bored stiff in here."

"Wait, I know this one; it's boring as hell."

"Huh." Annette cocked an eyebrow at that last comment. "Fine, I'll take them all back, then."

"Ah, wait, wait, can't you take a joke? Don't go! I mean, you can if you want—just leave the movies!"

"You want to watch some movies with them, kid? Anything catch your eye?"

"No, my dad's here, so I'll be leaving. Bye, everyone!"

"Yeah, yeah, see ya... Do you guys know that kid's parents?" Annette asked the boys.

"Nope, he's an Eighty-Six kid who was too young to be drafted. He saw the news about us and asked his foster father to visit us."

...*Shit*, Theo thought.

If he knew that kid was a fellow Eighty-Six, he wouldn't have ignored him like that. The kid cared enough to come check on them, so he should have paid him attention.

The child took the hand of a man in uniform—probably his foster father—who nodded at them before leaving. Theo felt guilty for not waving back at the kid, who had already turned away at that point. Instead, he looked at Annette.

"You said you were just passing by?"

Annette snuck a glance at him but didn't reply. Instead, she said:

"For how bored you seem to be, you're not actually trying to occupy yourself, are you?"

"I just don't feel like it. Not in the mood, I guess."

The thought of doing something to pass the time hadn't occurred to him. Or rather, he couldn't bring himself to do anything at all.

"Since you're here, do you mind if I ask? Hmm..."

What was this Alba girl's first name again? Theo wondered. She was a friend of Lena's and an old acquaintance of Shin's, but Theo hadn't talked to her that much before. They'd spoken a bit during the operation in the United Kingdom and a few times when they ran into

each other. Still, referring to her as “Major Penrose” felt impersonal and stiff.

“You can just call me Annette,” she said.

“Thanks... Annette, have you put any thought into what you’re going to do next? Like when the war ends. Or like how you came to the Federacy military after the large-scale offensive.”

“Yeah...,” Annette muttered vaguely.

This made Theo realize his question was insensitive, which caused him to fall silent.

“Sorry,” he eventually said.

“It’s fine... My mom died in the large-scale offensive, yeah. But I got to say good-bye.

“She didn’t run away,” Annette said with a bitter smile. On the eve of the Republic’s founding festival, her nation fell. Annette told her mother that she had to evacuate, but her mother simply shook off her grasp with a smile.

“She said she didn’t want to be a burden or have any regrets. And that she wanted to see her dead friends who lived next door. And Dad—she said she’d kept him waiting for too long...”

The other boys in the room were starting a movie on the big television. They were considerate enough to listen to the movie’s sound through wireless earphones. Since Theo wasn’t wearing his headphones, the movie was just silent footage for him. The other boys had their eyes fixed on the television, and they weren’t looking their way.

“Anyway, back to your question. Yeah... I didn’t think that deeply on it. In the large-scale offensive, I had my hands full just surviving. And when I came to the Federacy, figuring out how to apologize to Shin was the only thing on my mind. For now, I just wanna live through this, I guess. There’s lots of stuff I’d like to do someday.”

“Like what?”

“Like dressing up, eating tasty food, and seeing new movies. Oh, and throwing a pie at Lena and Shin for once. One with a lot of cream. And they can’t throw one back at me.”

“...That’s the stuff you want to do?” Theo couldn’t help but ask.

No way. Something that basic? All the things she mentioned bordered on the trivial.

“It’s stuff worth doing,” she said with a shrug. “Like, if I told you there’s this stall at the plaza that sells really good deep-fried bread, you’d want to check it out, right? Not that I’m gonna buy it for you... But you focus on little things like that and then find something else to do. And you keep doing that until your time is up.”

Theo smiled sarcastically at those words. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to die because there were things she wanted to do. She was still

alive, so she wanted to do something. Maybe life was all about repeating that process in perpetuity.

So if the choice was between living your life aimlessly and enjoying yourself...

"...Well, I guess I'll make checking that stall out my objective until I'm allowed to go outside."

"Good stuff. And while you're at it, help me throw pies at Lena and Shin. I'm sure we're both entitled to do that. And Raiden, as well. Oh, I wanna throw a pie at Dustin, too..."

"For Dustin, we gotta include me, Shin, Raiden, Kurena... Actually, count Lena also. And Rito—he knew Daiya, too. Anyway, all of us have a right to throw a pie at him."

It had been four months since Dustin and Anju got stranded in the United Kingdom, but it had only been a month since the dance party. One had to wonder what Dustin was waiting for.

"Oh, and I wanna throw a pie at the prince. For no reason in particular."

"For sure."

They exchanged looks for a moment and then snickered.

"Guess I'll have to figure out what I'll do about my left hand until then... Oh, right, my sketchbook," Theo said, as if suddenly remembering it was missing after all this time. "It's in my room in the base. Bring it over the next time you come visit."

Annette grinned at him.

"Roger, I'll handle that errand for you."

CHAPTER 4

MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL, WHAT DO ORDINARY MIRRORS SHOW?

In front of the smoking remains of a Weisel, a human voice—an unusual presence in the Legion’s territories—sounded in a triumphant shout.

“Hell yeah, it’s done for! We won! Whoooo!”

That shout came from Siri, who sat in his unit’s, Baldanders’s, cockpit. Transmitted through the Para-RAID, the radio, and his unit’s external speaker, his victory cry echoed throughout the battlefield.

They were in the northernmost tip of the Federacy’s western front, at the foot of a mountain that was part of the Dragon Corpse mountain range, which also served as the old Empire’s border with the United Kingdom. It was the designated operation zone of the Strike Package’s 2nd Armored Division.

A Free Regiment commander, who was currently seizing a nearby base, replied with a sardonic smile. Since they were in adjacent combat zones, Siri and he were Resonated so as to prevent friendly fire.

“Nice voice, First Lieutenant. A splendid baritone—reminds me of an opera singer I heard once.”

“Why, thank you. And, uh... sorry. I forgot I was still Resonating with you.”

He’d forgotten, indeed. Scratching his cheek awkwardly, he cut off the Resonance. Still, this battle had been chaotic enough that winning would cause him to whoop at the top of his voice. It had been

annoying and exhausting.

Before the enemy could prepare for combat, the Reginleifs were to raid it by leaping in with the Armée Furieuse and seizing control of the situation. The Federacy's plan was right on the money; they'd only run into a small number of Legion units, which were likely set to guard the Weisel directly.

Siri's strategy for dealing with large Legion types like the Noctiluca—bombarding their heat sinks—proved to be successful. However, the Weisel's heat sinks were larger and appropriately thick and durable, and it had multiple layers of them. It even had a few spare heat sinks inside its body, and after seemingly having broken down, it'd come back to life again. That was something they didn't plan for.

A new Resonance target connected to Siri. This time, it was Canaan, who was in the northern border of the old Republic regions.

“Good work. The 3rd Armored Division neutralized its target thirty minutes ago, by the way.”

The report was delivered in a voice that was all business, but it was definitely a boast. Siri clicked his tongue at the nonchalant tone.

“That's within the acceptable margin of error, you ass.”

“Well, the fastest ones to clear their objective were some Free Regiment soldiers on the northern front, so you're right. It also made clear the limitations of my method. If we can't accurately predict where the control core is, we need to start shooting blindly. Besides, the deployment openings and shafts are all full of mines and armored bulkheads. It takes too long to bust through them.”

“Yeah...”

Going inside through a deployment opening was usually seen as something to be avoided, but in the Weisel's case, it proved effective.

“This time, we gathered information on their internal structure with this simultaneous attack, so we'll probably be more accurate with our predictions next time. But I think we should give up on trying to get in through the deployment openings.”

“Our method was effective as well, sort of, but busting all the heat sinks takes too long. They're harder than you'd think, and the enemy's too big. Aiming at it with a tank turret at that elevation is hard. This time, it was fine, because we were fighting on land, but if it's a battle at sea like with the Noctiluca, I don't think it'll have any problems cooling off anyway.”

He then mentioned that it was probably worth learning how those systems worked, even if strictly out of curiosity.

“The 1st Armored Division's folk are using knives to cut through the armor and shoot missiles into their insides. That's the kind of

crazy idea that Nouzen and his merry band would come up with, I guess. But that plan might have been the most effective one after all.”

“So long as you can tear a hole into their armor, at worst, you don’t even have to shut down their cooling systems. It’s possible to destroy their control core or their power reactor... That said, Nouzen and his group are still fighting.”

Mm? Siri raised an eyebrow.

“Wait, they’re working with the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment, that railgun prototype, *and* Nouzen, who can detect the enemy’s core...and they’re not done yet?”

“Well, they’re up against that Halcyon unit. The Weisel that has railguns on it. They have to march on that monster bird while taking out its railguns. I’d imagine that’d take them a while.”

“...No, actually, from the looks of it, it seems like everything went smoothly up to the part where they stalled the Halcyon,” Suiu, who was in training in the Federacy, suddenly cut into the conversation.

Her voice sounded quite strained.

“—What’s wrong?” Siri asked.

“Did something happen?” Canaan seemed concerned.

“Yeah. Colonel Grethe’s already on the move, and all the 4th Armored Division’s members—deputy officers and below—and the staff officers are supposed to record it. Listen to what she has to say if you can, too.”



The Halcyon crashed into the ground, resulting in a quake that made even the ten-tonne Reginleifs hop, and blew a thick layer of ash into the air like some kind of exhausted sigh. Shin heaved a breath of his own, and while still remaining cautious, he spoke.

Burning it from the inside for a moment wasn’t enough to take it out after all. Every one of the control cores, with the exception of the railguns, were intact. He could still hear their howls.

“Vanadis. Temporary incapacitation of the Halcyon successful. Proceeding to keep the combat area secured until the Trauerschwan and the brigade’s main force assume firing positions.”

“Roger that. Good work, all airborne units,” Lena replied, hearing the Processors of the airborne battalion cheer from over the Resonance. “Cyclops, don’t do anything reckless, please.”

In contrast to their operation in the Fleet Countries, where they were rather backed against the wall, the countermeasure they came

up with on their own proved effective and produced results. That made them feel all the more accomplished.

Shiden, whom she scolded, simply gave a vague response and immediately lunged at Shin.

“Yeah, ma’am... Oh, and by the way, Li’l Reaper? Hey, Li’l Reeeeeper. I’m talking to ya, Reaper!”

“Ugh, what do you want?” Shin replied with blatant annoyance in his voice.

“You know damn well what I want. I risked my neck to keep the railgun’s sights off ya—don’t you have somethin’ to say?”

“You volunteered for this. I don’t need to hear your complaints.”

“I wasn’t complainin’, was I? I just said you’ve got somethin’ ya need to tell me.”

Shin responded with an exasperated clicking of the tongue.

Bernholdt and the Nordlicht squadron seemed astonished, while Anju held back a chuckle. Raiden, Claude, and Tohru all laughed out loud. Lena couldn’t help but smile as she gave her next orders; it felt like it had been too long since she heard Shin and Shiden bicker like that.

“Undertaker, Cyclops, that’s enough of that. Airborne battalion, keep a careful watch over the combat area. Main force, we need to get the Trauerschwan in position as quickly as possible...”

It was then that Hilnå said something. It wasn’t in the Republic’s or the Federacy’s common language, but in the Theocracy’s tongue, which neither Lena nor the Eighty-Six could understand.

And then within the giant holo-screen projected into the command center...

...every soldier with the unit symbol of a swift, dapple-gray horse—the soldiers of Shiga Toura, the Theocracy’s 3rd Army Corps under her direct command—suddenly stopped in their tracks.

Lena, the staff officers, and the control personnel like Marcel were all taken aback. The diversion unit wasn’t scheduled to stop marching at this point in time, of course.

“...Hilnå, what are you—?” Lena turned to face her.

This time, Hilnå spoke in the Republic’s and the Federacy’s common language. With a cherubic smile, and a voice as soft and supple as lush silica sand.

“Bloody Reina. Eighty-Six. Will you defect to our country?”

“...?!”

Rito swallowed nervously as countless dots suddenly filled his radar screen. It was directly ahead in the direction they were traveling, in an area cleared of the Legion's advance force. The IFF didn't respond to those units; their heat signatures were unknown. And they were spread out in a fan formation—positioned for an ambush.

“Spread out!”

By the time, he'd shouted that order to his consorts, he had already moved to make Milan jump away. Rito was an Eighty-Six and had his warrior's senses whetted by the hardships of war. He was by no means optimistic enough to adopt a wait-and-see approach when faced with unidentified units in an ambush.

The thundering rumble of high-caliber cannon fire roared from ahead of them. As Rito withstood the severe acceleration that resulted from his evasive maneuver, he glared at the optical screen with his agate eyes. An aerodynamic shell had just barely skimmed across Milan's flank. A large cloud of ashes rose from the source of that shot.

Its firing speed was quick. And what's more, it'd unleashed a powerful blast behind it that was unique to *that weapon*.

A gun without recoil.

“Shit, that means another shot's coming! Keep dodging!”

The cannon roared loudly again, and HEAT shells once again rained down on them. More clouds of dust bloomed up, filling the air and blinding their field of vision.

A recoilless gun was an anti-armor gun that negated the recoil of firing large shells by unleashing it as a shock wave behind it. With this method, even a lightweight Feldreß could carry a large-caliber gun, but it had major flaws.

Most of the gunpowder's kinetic energy was devoted to reducing the recoil, making the shells slower, and the intense backward blast kicked up sand and sediment, exposing the shooter's position. For this reason, units that used recoilless guns didn't carry one barrel, but six of them. The first shot would expose one's position, but in the event that it failed to destroy the enemy, one could fire a second or third shot immediately.

This was something that Rito had been taught immediately before this operation. Which was to say, neither Reginleifs nor Juggernauts—nor the Legion that opposed them—used this recoilless gun. Which meant...

The wind blew past, carrying with it some of the ash that hung over the battlefield like a curtain. And on the other side of it appeared a group of small, pearl-gray shadows.

Pearl-gray.

These were units that sacrificed pure mobility to prioritize

remaining above the ash that covered this land. They had four wide mechanical-looking legs. They maintained large contact surface with the ground and were reminiscent of a bird's wings. Even when accounting for the shape of those legs, which seemed to be crawling across the ground, they had short torsos, no taller than Frederica. Stretching from each of its flanks was a set of three gigantic 106 mm recoilless guns, spread out like wings.

They very much looked like they'd been built hurriedly in the middle of a war. They were hard to look at. The sight of them almost felt brutal, like watching small, injured birds dragging their broken wings along the ground.

The armored type 7, Lyano-Shu.

The unmanned drone that accompanied the Theocracy military's official Feldreß, the armored type 5 Fah-Maras. Many Fah-Maras had been destroyed during the decade of fighting, and so the type 7 drones were produced in large numbers to compensate.

"...Why?"

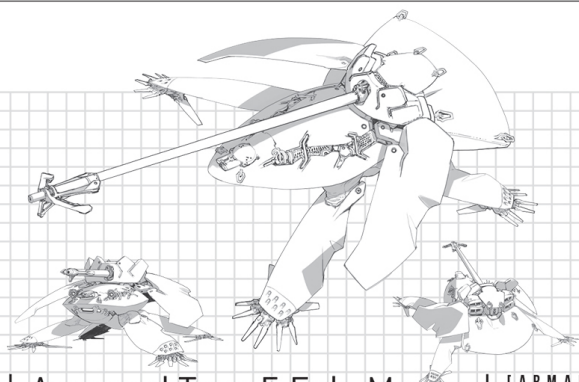
Fah-Maras units appeared behind the Lyano-Shu. They moved in a manner typical to the Theocracy's Feldreß, in something reminiscent to an infant crawling, like an animal dragging along its broken limbs. It, too, had eight winglike legs, but since it was a manned unit, and the stressed situation of the war meant the pilot's life had to be prioritized, its thick, heavy frontal armor was covered with extra armor plates. Even the engine and cartridge of its 120 mm *rifle* cannon were placed ahead of the cockpit to shield the pilot, making for a rather distinctive design.

There could be no doubting it anymore. The Theocracy military—which had been their allies up until now—had turned their guns on the Eighty-Six and the Federacy's Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, as enemies.

Faced with Lena's stunned gaze, Hilnå grinned.

As she turned around with her back to the main screen, the Theocracy control and staff officers remained with their eyes fixed on their consoles, as if none of this was out of the ordinary. They didn't regard the corps abruptly stopping in their tracks and the corps commanders' sudden words with doubt or confusion. They remained silent and unresponsive, as if everything was going according to plan.

FRIENDLY UNIT



The Theocracy's Feldreß. Is similar in concept to the Federacy's Vánagandr and greatly stresses the survival of the pilot. However, due to the Theocracy's inferior technological prowess, its overall performance is a far cry from the Vánagandr's.

Armored Type 5 Fah-Maras

[S P E C S]

Manufacturer: Theocracy Temple Blacksmith Armory

Total Length: 7.0 m / Height: 2.9 m

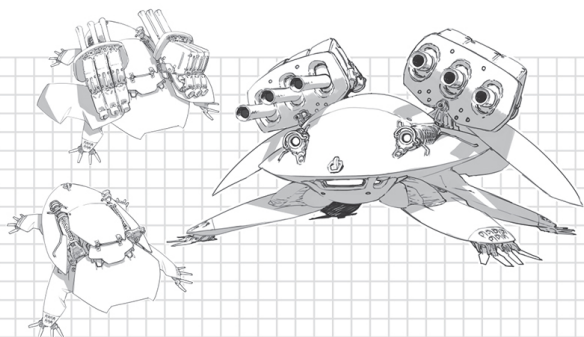
[A R M A M E N T S]

120 mm Rifle Cannon ×1

12.7 mm Machine Gun

(coaxial with main gun) ×1

12.7 mm Machine Gun (revolving) ×1



*An injection gun is equipped to this unit to confirm its weapons' sights are properly aligned. This unit does not use a laser sight.

A drone unit that escorts and is controlled by its main unit, the Fah-Maras. Its maneuverability and mobility are poor, and it functions less as a tank and more as a self-propelled cannon. Is mostly used during ambushes.

Armored Type 7 Lyano-Shu

[S P E C S]

Manufacturer: Theocracy Temple Blacksmith Armory

Total Length: 3.2 m / Height: 1.6 m

[A R M A M E N T S]

106 mm Recoiless Gun ×6

12.7 mm Spotting Rifle* ×2

The only change was that their faces, hidden under their hoods, were tilted slightly as they exchanged gazes and began whispering to one another.

Lena withstood the urge to click her tongue. The frontline units weren't the only ones involved in this. The staff officers were in on it, too. If nothing else, the entirety of the 3rd Army Corps, Shiga Toura, were their enemies.

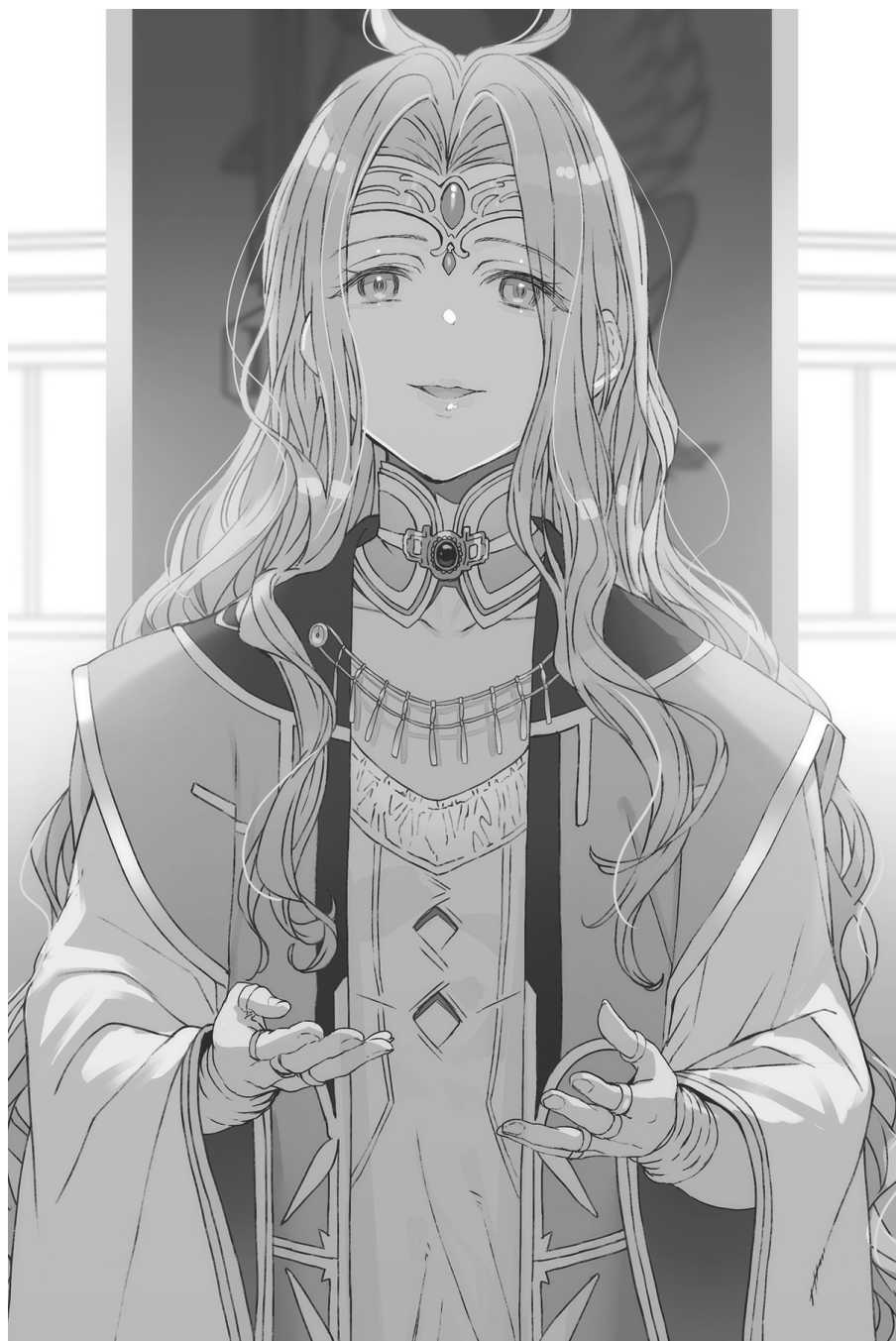
But aside from that, she'd noticed something else that was off: the Theocracy staff officers' voices and the lines of their jaws, which were slightly visible under their hoods. They looked much younger than she'd imagined. They were, at best, the same age as Shin and Lena, if not a year or two younger.

Of course, teen officers weren't all that unusual in this day and age. The Federacy had its special officers, and Lena was of course used to being around the Eighty-Six. But this was the corps command center. And even with their dwindling number of soldiers, the oldest of the Theocracy's soldiers were only in their twenties.

It was strange. It was like everything implied that the Theocracy's army was made up entirely of teens and young adults... And indeed, Lena couldn't remember seeing a single adult soldier since she'd arrived at the Theocracy. The staff officers, the translators, the child soldiers who showed up to play with them—*they were all young*.

And so Hilnå watched Lena, who stood wordless, with uncaring eyes. She shifted her gaze to the Federacy officers, clad in their metal-black uniforms, as their expressions changed from suspicion to caution to distress, and then repeated the question.

"Will you defect to our country? Eighty-Six, Bloody Reina, and the many staff officers. Present your achievements and feats of heroism—your very selves—as an offering to us."



In terms of the chain of command, the 3rd Battalion had no hierarchical relationship with the Strike Package, so there was no reason Shin would be connected to Hilnå over the radio. But even so, Hilnå's voice reached his ears, and in a sonorous way.

Her voice was transmitted through the device they were given at high volume. It was clearly relayed to them with the intention that they'd hear it.

"Will you defect to our country? Eighty-Six, Bloody Reina, and the many staff officers. Present your achievements and feats of heroism—your very selves—as an offering to us."

"...What is she thinking?"

The operation was still underway, and they'd never asked to defect to begin with. But this clearly wasn't a question or an invitation. This was...

"You must relish in the desire to save others, ye heroes. Then know that our country's situation is much more dire than the Federacy's. Prioritize us over the Federacy and every other country, for none are more pitiable and helpless than we."

...a threat.

They wanted to take away the information the Strike Package had. Or maybe they wanted to get their hands on the Eighty-Six as soldiers—just like the remnants of the Republic, the Bleachers, did.

It seemed the Eintagsfliege's deployment was thin at the moment. There were only scant traces of static noise littering the radio transmission as the girl's gentle laughter danced upon the airwaves.

"Should you refuse to accept, you will perish on this battlefield."

Even still, the Eighty-Six couldn't understand what was going on. They could understand that the Theocracy's army, which had been their allies until now, had suddenly turned their muzzles on them. They could understand that they were now their enemies. But why? What in the world was going on?

The ones to respond to this first were the Myrmecoleo Regiment. The only one of the five divisions to remain as rear guard rather than act as part of the diversion force, which had remained behind the rest of the main force—the 8th Division. As the enemy snuck up behind them, the cinnabar-colored units immediately turned around and opened fire.

The Reginleifs reacted a moment too late. They weren't

shamefully hit by the first shots, but as Gilwiese saw the division directly behind him move in a way that clearly showed that they didn't anticipate the surprise attack, he held back the urge to click his tongue.

They likely didn't even think the Theocracy might betray them. They didn't expect betrayal in any of the other countries' battlefields that they'd been to, or in the Federacy's territory, despite the fact that it wasn't their own homeland.

"You're too naive, Eighty-Six! People and even entire countries can betray you; don't you know that?!"

And all that after both the Federacy and the Theocracy had pushed them into acting as the advance force and the airborne unit, which were by far the most dangerous roles in this operation!

Yet even with that in mind, they'd never considered it. These child soldiers, who had been forced into the Republic's deadly Eighty-Sixth Sector, who had fought on and clung to life, never giving in to despair. They didn't know that when all was said and done, war was nothing but a gruesome, unsightly method that people employed to settle disputes among themselves.

"Gilwiese to all captains! As of this moment, the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment voluntarily terminates its support mission for the Theocracy military!"

His order wasn't met with any doubt or confusion. Ever since they'd been deployed, Gilwiese had held some suspicion toward the Theocracy and even toward the Strike Package, like a blade held between his lips. He was always ready for betrayal, so when it did happen, he wasn't caught off guard.

"The Theocracy armored unit in our twelve o'clock direction is to be set as an unknown enemy unit. In the name of protecting the Federacy Expedition Brigade—"

After all, the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment was established as a tool to be utilized in the name of a conflict. So the nobility could use them to steal rights over the military away from the civilians. So the crimson noble Pyropes could regain the title of hero from the Onyx half-breed. And so they could make sure that those who drew on the blood of the Pyropes but sullied it by being ordinary officers could remain as a military force, while keeping the honor of being a soldier.

"—we hereby open hostilities with the Theocracy's 3rd Army Corps's 8th Division, as well as the unknown enemy unit. We will show them!"

Show those children, who may have known the malice and irrationality of a battlefield overrun with Legion but were still ignorant and innocent of the darkness and gloom of the world of humanity.

“...Even though they’ve been betrayed by their own homeland and had everything taken from them, these children haven’t lost the fundamental humanity needed to believe in something.”

He found it enviable. But as the words escaped his lips, the roar of the Vánagandr’s power pack drowned them out, and they failed to reach Svenja’s ears.

“Should you refuse to accept, you will perish on the battlefield.”

Kurena listened to those words in blank amazement. It was the same dainty, delicate, and seemingly virtuous girl she’d met earlier, the same one who’d prayed for their success in battle just before the mission. She asked them to save her country, and the Strike Package responded to her words.

But then dark emotion surged up from the bottom of her heart like a stalagmite. Kurena clenched her toes bitterly. That girl’s adorable demeanor, her smile, the kindness she directed toward them.

It was all a lie.

“...How dare you.”

Why did she believe her? *Help us*, she said, as if to say *fight in our name*. She stroked their egos, calling them heroes, when all she really wanted was to use them as weapons. And that was no different than what the Republic’s white pigs would say.

And really, white pigs weren’t only in the Republic. There were other pigs just like them everywhere. And the Theocracy was but one more. Every other country was capable of it. They would tempt them with sweet words and gentle smiles by speaking of intangible hopes like dreams and the future.

That was how everyone tried to take advantage of her and her friends.

Everywhere was the same. It was always the same.

Everyone other than her comrades would always try to make use of them, and then they’d cruelly, ruthlessly take everything away.

That was how the Eighty-Six were always treated. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, it was through death on the battlefield. In more peaceful places, it was through pitying expressions. And here in the Theocracy, it was by forcing the mantle of *hero* upon them.

It was always done so naturally, as if using and being used was the fundamental nature of the world.

It felt as if a dark curtain had settled over her field of vision.

Right. In the end, that’s what people—what the world—were like. Cold, ruthless, callous, and despicable. It was a place where the more hope you had, the more you could expect to lose.

Like how they took away her parents. Like how they took away

her older sister. Just like how they took away Theo's pride, even as he wanted nothing more than to fight to the very end.

She wouldn't believe in anything anymore. The only ones worthy of trust were her comrades. And all who weren't her comrades were either her enemies or meaningless people who simply hadn't turned their backs on them yet.

She wouldn't believe in people. Or the world, or the future. Or the end of the war.



<<Cooling of propulsion system complete. Plan Ferdinand, rebooting.>>
<<Warning. Control cores of railguns numbers one to five have all been eliminated.
Commencing repairs while using railgun number one's core as the basis for reproduction.>>
<<Melusine Two, commencing reproduction. Melusine Three, commencing reproduction.
Melusine Four, commencing reproduction—>>
<<Melusine Six, reproduction complete.>>
<<Railguns numbers one to five—restart.>>



Suddenly, the trembling of the crouching behemoth, not unlike a dying insect's convulsions, became a stable vibration. It was the sound of the Halcyon's powerful propulsion system restarting. It had been built to support its massive weight, and it had just recovered from its temporary shutdown due to overheating.

The metallic behemoth lifted its gigantic form, causing the earth to tremble beneath its weight.

<<So cold.>>

And as the Halcyon rose, the girls' pained wails, which had been silenced, spilled from its massive form once again. The Shepherd controlling the railgun... Shana's mechanical ghost. Its wailing echoed around them in close range from each of the five turrets at the same time.

<<So cold.>> <<Socold.>> <<SOcoldcOID.>><<ld>><<COLD>><<So>><<ColdCOLDCOLD>>
<<Coldldldldldldldld...!>>

“Ngh?!”

“Aaah...!”

This was the first operation where Olivia and Zashya were Resonated with Shin in live combat. The two of them weren't used to his ability yet, and they promptly cut the Para-RAID's link and left the communication network.

The agony—the mechanical madness was simply that intense.

The reactivated railguns swiveled, pointing up toward the heavens. The flashing light of an arc discharge cut across the ashen

sky as it unleashed a long, incessant barrage upward.

The airborne battalion's units evaded the shower of buckshot, which weighed several tonnes, and quickly moved away from the Halcyon to escape the bombardment range of the shrapnel. Having swatted away the insects buzzing about them and regained their minimal range, the railguns moved their guns to a level degree of elevation—horizontally. Shana's wailings once again rose in pitch.

"...!"

"Dammit, not again...!"

"Hearing it from this close up... It really is hard...!"

The sheer weight of those screams clawed at everyone's hearts. Even Raiden and the Spearhead squadron members, who had fought alongside Shin for years and were used to his ability. Even Claude and the Processors of the airborne battalion who had been on several operations with him already.

"Shin! Are you all right?!"

"Yeah. It's a little hard when it's really close, but at this distance, I'll be fine."

The fact that the five railguns could come back to life without using the liquid butterflies like the Noctiluca did came as a surprise... But since the Halcyon was originally a Weisel, it could produce Liquid Micromachines from inside its body to compensate for the damage it took, and it would be able to put them to use without having to expose them to the outside.

Olivia soon reconnected to the Resonance, and a moment later, so did Zashya. Her teeth were still clattering a little, but she spoke bravely.

"I-it only took it two hundred seconds to reboot. It's recovering faster than expected, Captain Nouzen! And with the Trauerschwan's march being obstructed on top of that, if we try to overheat it every time it activates, we won't have enough shells to last for too long!"

Anju then entered the conversation.

"Shin, we only have seven missile launchers between us and the other unit. The artillery squadron wants to save its ammunition to keep the Trauerschwan's shots from being intercepted. It's as she says: We can't keep knocking it down again and again."

"We don't have that many tank or autocannon shells left, either. We couldn't bring Fido along to our pleasant little flight."

"Yeah. So at worst, even if we can't incapacitate it, we need to at least make sure it doesn't shoot the Trauerschwan. We've confirmed the blade-piles are effective; we just need to destroy the Halcyon, and our objective will be complete."

Either way, they had to defeat this threat to the Federacy. And if they could, they needed to collect information or parts from the wreckage. And most importantly, they all had to come back alive. So in the name of all those objectives...

"Królik, I'm sharing optical footage of the Halcyon's insides with you. Can you single out its cooling system's pipes?"

"Roger; that's our countermeasure for if we run out of rockets, right? I'll have it done."

"Shiden, can I count on you to deal with *Shana* again?" he asked Shiden, who'd remained silent ever since the screams resumed.

He knew this was a heartless question to ask. She'd decided to put her to rest with her own two hands and even went through with it, only for Shana to come back to life as if to spite her. Asking Shiden to slay her again was too cruel.

But her response was surprisingly calm.

"Yeah, I'll handle it. And don't talk to me with that worried tone, Li'l Reaper."

She even smirked at him wryly, unexpectedly enough.

"I'll pummel her so far underground, she'll have no choice but to stay down. No one gets to bury her but me."

Carrying firearms was strictly forbidden in the Theocracy's control room. Before entering, Lena and the others had been instructed to leave their weapons behind, and they abided by those instructions. An assault rifle's barrel was too long to hide. And so Lena lacked the power to defend herself, to say nothing of breaking out of there.

"No," Lena said over her shoulder. "We refuse."

In the next moment, the control officer sitting next to her kicked her own chair away and rose to her feet. She was clad in a steel-colored uniform, so as to fool the Theocracy into thinking that she was part of the control personnel. And at first sight, she looked perfectly human. The only thing that set her apart was the vivid shade of her hair and her glassy eyes. And of course, the quasi-nerve crystal in her forehead.

A Sirin.

"Presumed situation, Eight of Red. Commencing combat."

She held up her palms toward the staff guarding the doors, who suddenly spurted blood and staggered back. She was likely a modified model that had a repeating firearm hidden between her arm mechanisms.

Carrying firearms was strictly forbidden in the Theocracy's control room. Before entering, Lena and the others had been instructed to leave their weapons behind, and they abided by those rules. And this

was why the possibility of a Sirin, a mechanical doll that hid a firearm within her body, was something Hilnå and the guards couldn't anticipate.

“—Run!”

At the same moment, a broadly built supply-staff officer threw Lena over his shoulder and sprinted toward the exit. The male control and intelligence officers followed suit, kicking away the guards who were kneeling on the ground and clutching their injured shoulders, and punched the button that operated the door mechanism.

The supply officer slipped through the door, covering for Lena. The control officers, staff officers, and the Sirin that had snuck in as an officer followed them. Thankfully, there was no sign of any Theocracy soldiers in the long corridor. They ran down the hallway, but it was still a dangerous path to tread. It was a single straight line with nothing to offer cover.

Seeing Marcel wince, the officer running next to him slowed down and asked:

“Second Lieutenant Marcel, are you all right?”

“If it's just a short distance, I can still run better than any punk in the streets.”

Marcel was originally a Vánagandr Operator but changed professions to a control officer after injuring his leg. His leg couldn't react as quickly as would be required of an Operator, but he was perfectly capable of running, nonetheless.

“...But going long distances might be pretty bad. Don't worry, though; leave me behind if things go south.”

“You know we can't do that,” the officer said.

“Yes, serving as rear guard is a Sirin's duty,” the mechanical girl cut into their exchange.

As they turned a corner, they used the wall as cover and stopped for a moment. The Sirin apologized and rolled up the uniform pants that covered her slender knees. Apparently, there was a slit set within her artificial skin.

Marcel couldn't help but look away, but the staff officers gasped. Underneath this artificial girl's human-shaped legs were silvery, metallic bones and nothing else. Her body was supported and propelled by a cylindrical linear actuator. There weren't even artificial substitutes where her muscles should have been, but rather several machine pistols hidden inside the empty aperture of her legs.

“His Highness prepared this in case of emergency. They use custom high-speed revolving pointed bullets, made for antipersonnel targets. They should be useful for getting out of here.”

Their initial velocity was quick, and they should have been capable of penetrating body plates. What's more, the bullets rotated

inside the body, causing damage to tissues without wasting any kinetic energy. From Vika's perspective, the Theocracy—or rather, humans in general—were perfectly capable of betrayal, and preparing for that only came naturally to him.

The vividness of it all made Lena and Marcel wince. The staff officers, by contrast, didn't hesitate to pick up the gun grips.

“—The hunks of scrap metal are one thing, but this isn't the kind of toy we should be aiming at people,” an operations staff officer said, less to the two of them and more to himself.

The Sirin girl nodded.

“I leave the rest to you, human friends... I can't run for much longer, so I will stay here and stall for time.”

She'd done away with her artificial muscles and had only moved minimally on her linear actuator. She could still walk, but she couldn't run for long. She smiled at them and left, and moments later, they could hear a loud explosion rattle the command center they'd just left behind. The fragrant pearl-gray walls shook.

The Theocracy's 3rd Army Corps, which were in charge of the diversion, had stopped in place, but that was irrelevant to the Legion they were currently fighting. A part of the Legion units turned around and hurried over to defend the Halcyon, but many of the Legion still remained to exterminate the enemy. This meant that the Theocracy army, which was meant to keep the Legion in check, was instead stopped in place by the Legion they were meant to distract.

To begin with, an entire division, numbering in the tens of thousands, was too large a unit to change course or stop in its tracks that easily. Especially when the enemy in front of them was trying to prevent them from doing anything. And with the 2nd Army Corps right next to them, they were impeded by both their own large size and the horde of Legion fighting them.

But even though the entirety of the Theocracy military had turned on them, the only ones to fight the Federacy Expedition Brigade directly were the ambush regiment in front of them and the 8th Division, which had attacked them from behind.

And while two divisions were a much larger force compared with them, the Strike Package's Reginleifs and the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment's Vánagandr's were Federacy Feldreß—cutting-edge models developed by one of the strongest military powers on the continent and honed on the battlefield. Despite the numerical disadvantage, the Federacy Expedition Brigade successfully intercepted the enemy army's attack.

However...

...the Fah-Maras was a manned unit, and Rito and his comrades couldn't very well use it as a stepping stone the same way they did against the Legion. Even if they knew this unit wasn't a brittle walking coffin like the Juggernaut, and even if it was as armored and sturdy as a Vánagandr or a Löwe.

None of that mattered. There were people inside.

"Why...?!"

He recalled one boy who had enjoyed eating lemon peels. Another one who was good at arm wrestling. An older boy who had served him tea that had spicy condiments mixed into it when they first got to the Theocracy.

They weren't lying about that—that much was obvious—but if that's the case, then why?

An alarm blared.

As thin as the Reginleif's armor was, it deflected 12.7 mm bullets, but being attacked had activated its alerts. A spotting rifle had probably shot at him. Since the ash got in the way of laser sights, this rifle was used exclusively for focusing the sights of one's weapon on the blank sector's battlefield.

And if a spotting rifle had been fired, it meant a cannon shot was bound to follow.

Rito dodged away, reflexively turning the muzzle of his 88 mm gun toward the enemy. But his sights fixed on a Fah-Maras. And inside, there could have been someone who had shared sweets with him, competed with him, or played with him.

Rito wavered in the last second. But the Fah-Maras unflinchingly fired at him. He could hear a voice coming from its external speaker. It sounded like the speaker was a girl, or perhaps a boy whose voice hadn't deepened yet. They spoke in a language he didn't know, but their way of speech made their intent clear.

I'm sorry.

If they went as far as to say that...then why?

"...!"

Rito was lucky that he'd taken evasive measures ahead of time. The tank shell narrowly skimmed by Milan, flying past it before bursting. The shells' fragments pelted his unit in close range, smashing his optical screen. The screen's sharp fragments rained over his head.

"Rito?!"

"I'm fine, just a little scratched. Sorry, I can keep commanding, but fighting might be a little too much right now."

The shards of the optical screen had only scratched him. But the cut was on his forehead, directly above his right eye. His dominant eye was sealed shut with blood, and as he touched it, he realized this wasn't a wound that was going to close on its own any time soon. He

tried wiping the blood away, even though he knew it was pointless.

“Why...?!”

“Imperials are as war-obsessed as ever...”

Only one *Federacy soldier* fought back against those in the base, just to self-destruct in the end. She'd hidden some kind of high-explosive device on her, which even had ball bearings hidden inside it to function as shrapnel. The sterile pearl-gray of the walls was now stained with blood, its stench suffocating the aroma of the command center's scented eaglewood.

Hilnå sighed. An explosive's blast would be lethal enough on its own, but they had to add metallic balls to create a buckshot, increasing its lethality and range. It was a similar idea to a buckshot mine. The girl had a pistol, which she'd somehow hidden on her person, but once she'd run out of bullets, she refused to surrender. Had the control officers not noticed her defiance and grabbed onto the Federacy soldier, none of the command center's people would have survived.

The two officers who had taken hold of her were torn away by the buckshot, and the female soldier who blew herself up was decimated by the blast. Three people's worth of flesh and blood, as well as countless metal fragments, scattered across the command center in a gory splatter. The officer who'd pushed Hilnå down to the floor was covered in other people's blood and was also bleeding a bit himself.

Hilnå, however, was kept safe by his protection and the two other officers' sacrifice. There wasn't a scratch on her. A droplet of blood that had splashed onto her white cheeks was the only thing her faithful blades had failed to deflect.

“Are you all right, Princess?!” the officer who had protected her asked.

“Yes. You have my thanks, as do the two who sacrificed themselves.”

A human body could serve as an effective shield against bullets and buckshot. Since the dawn of modern military, there were countless stories of soldiers who threw themselves over hand grenades to save their comrades.

And that is how we've protected our country: by sacrificing many.

Hilnå wiped the droplet of blood under her eyes, drawing a line of bloody rouge on her unblemished, snow-white skin, like makeup.

“To adhere to your fate and fall in battle as the call of destiny dictates. How fortunate...and enviable.”

A cinnabar-colored Vánagandr covered for a Reginleif that had failed to evade a shot, standing in the shot's way and blocking the HEAT shell with its firm frontal armor. The solid plate prevented the metal jet from invading the Vánagandr's interior, while the 120 mm APFSDS that it fired back as a counterattack blew the Lyano-Shu to bits.

"Are you all right, kid?"

"Th-thank you..."

"Don't mention it. Shielding women and children from harm is our honor."

Listening to this exchange through the radio and almost imagining the toothy grin of the Vánagandr pilot, Frederica felt a bit reluctant. But after seeing the sight with her own eyes, she parted her lips in thanks.

She was sitting inside one of the Trauerschwan's leg control chambers, hidden behind the Reginleif formation. Lena's group was still escaping, and her acting substitutes, the squad commanders, were all in the middle of combat. As much as she was a Mascot and lacked any authority, she should at least thank them in their stead.

A Vánagandr's frontal armor could block even a 120 mm tank shell, but while she did feel urged to tell them not to be reckless, she also realized it would be uncalled-for.

But Svenja, who had likely seen the same thing Frederica did, butted into the transmission before she could. And rudely at that.

"Did you see that just now, Eighty-Six?! The Myrmecoleo Regiment's Vánagandrs will shield you, so remain tucked away and hide in the back row! Our crimson steeds will not allow any sneaky arrows to slip past—"

Frederica shouted back at her. How dare another unit's Mascot say that to them?!

"Your *frontal* armor, that is! Your slow, sluggish Vánagandr are good for making a wall, perhaps. And putting everything aside, you haven't any authority over your own unit, to say nothing of the right to order other units around. Keep your head bowed and your mouth shut, you petty ornament!"

"Eep?!"

Even though she'd shouted at her at the top of her lungs without a hint of reservation, Frederica's voice was still that of a young girl, barely into her teens. It was still enough to make Svenja jolt and cower audibly enough for Frederica to hear it over the radio. As Frederica cocked an eyebrow, the target of the call switched over to Gilwiese.

"You're quite right. My apologies if we confused the chain of command. However, I would appreciate it if you could refrain from raising your voice at our Princess. She's quite sensitive to

shouting.”

“...Well, I suppose no harm was done, as none of the Processors were listening to her.”

After all, the Eighty-Six were supposedly used to the Republic's Handlers occasionally prattling over the Sensory Resonance and radio. They wouldn't just disregard some unfamiliar Mascot's words; they wouldn't lend her an ear to begin with.

With that said, Frederica furrowed the bridge of her eyes. It wouldn't cause any trouble over the wireless, but...

“However, you tell me not to shout, but it falls on you to educate her on the basics of battlefield behavior. Pay attention to that. And do not ask me to refrain from scolding her for it. You claim to be her brother figure, do you not?”

“...I apologize.”

“...I can see why she's Captain Nouzen's 'younger sister.' She's got a good head on her shoulders, Princess.”

After shutting off the radio with a sardonic smile, Gilwiese turned around with some effort, facing the gunner's seat. They were inside Mock Turtle's vertical column two-seater cockpit. The seat was too cramped for an adult, but too large for Svenja's small frame.

Especially now, as she sat curled up and shivering. Gilwiese spoke to her with mindful calm.

“That wasn't the archduchess shouting at you. It wasn't the archduchess scolding you. It's fine. Don't be afraid.”

“Y-yes...,” she muttered, fearfully raising her head.

The signs of tears and panic were still stark in her golden eyes.

That Mascot girl wouldn't leave Shin's side, so he assumed she was some girl who was related to House Nouzen. Or maybe she was involved with Shin's foster father—the temporary president, Ernst. The president was a soldier before the revolution, and soldiers were either nobles or commoners affiliated with their regiment. Regardless, they were under the governor's command. So that former governor could have entrusted Shin to care for an illegitimate child. It wasn't implausible.

Either way, that girl likely came from an Onyx warrior line and also had Pyrope blood running through her veins.

And despite being a Pyrope half-breed, like Svenja, she couldn't comprehend her terror at being scolded. And she'd even argued a grown adult like Gilwiese down without any signs of fear.

“...No good. I feel... What's the right word for it? *Outraged*, I suppose.”

He couldn't very well fault the Mascot girl for having grown up

without ever knowing the taste of the whip. The Onyx didn't need to engage in *selective breeding*, and so they had no children who were failed products. Unwanted wastes of effort who had to live while enduring shouts and swears for being worthless parasites.

"B-Brother. Right, we should report to 'Father,' in that case. If we were to inform 'Father' that this second-rate excuse of a theocracy betrayed us, I'm sure he would deliver retribution—"

"Assuming we *could* tell him. Princess... The Eintagsfliege are jamming our communications. We can't contact the Federacy right now."

"...Ah."

Standing between them and the Federacy were the Theocracy, the Republic, and the far-west countries, as well as the Legion's contested zones and territories. The Eintagsfliege were constantly deployed over their territories, their electromagnetic disruption blocking off wireless communication.

In other words, whatever happened to the Expedition Brigade in the Theocracy, the Federacy's mainland wouldn't be alerted to it. They had no means of asking the Federacy to bail them out of this situation or apply pressure on the Theocracy.

The Strike Package, and originally the Republic, employed the Sensory Resonance. A mechanical recreation of a sliver of Marquess Maika's ability. They failed to fully reproduce the ability, of course, but the device did allow communications that ignored distance and the Eintagsfliege's disruption.

But it was, when all was said and done, just a machine. Someone in the Federacy had to have a RAID Device set to communicate with the 1st Armored Division, and they needed to have it on at this very moment. And even if Gilwiese and Svenja did inform someone in the Federacy, it would take time for help to arrive.

And in the current climate, it was unlikely that the Federacy, even if it was heir to the glorious Giadian Empire, would be willing to enter a war with the Theocracy. Realistically speaking, all they'd lose were two regiments. They wouldn't start a war just to reclaim them. Especially not the Eighty-Six, who weren't citizens of the Federacy by birth or had any families that wanted to see them back.

They would be lauded as tragic heroes, and the citizens would clamor about their fate for a time, but once the Federacy announced that they'd cease supporting the Theocracy or make some other sanction, the story would be forgotten before long.

No one would care if a unit of commoners were to die. In the end, the Myrmecoleo Regiment was nothing more than a disposable pawn, for both the Federacy and their lords. Their loss wouldn't cause anyone any lasting pain.

“...And this is why being a standout unit doesn’t do you any favors.”

“But...what’s the point?” Shin murmured to himself.

It wasn’t something he should have been thinking about in this situation, but it simply made no sense. What was happening probably wouldn’t trigger a war with the Federacy, but it would create antagonism and only worsen the Theocracy’s position.

The Theocracy’s relations with the Federacy, the United Kingdom, and the Alliance would sour, and they would lose any future support they were set to receive. And while it wouldn’t be as severe as the Republic’s case, they would still be branded pariahs for forcing child soldiers into combat... And all they’d gain in exchange for that was two armored regiments.

It didn’t even out.

No, even before considering that, to begin with...

“...Why are they doing this now?”

That was the part that stuck out to Lena. After all, the Halcyon had only been forced into temporary immobility due to overheating. It was the menacing massive gun held against the Theocracy’s temple; eliminating it should have been their top priority. And not only was it still at large, but their armies were also still locked in combat with the Legion’s frontline forces.

So why would they betray the Federacy Expedition Brigade and risk fighting on two fronts—even if one of the armies they’d be fighting was that much weaker? Why betray them *now*? There was nothing they stood to gain from turning on them here.

Hilnā mentioned achievements and information, but the Federacy Expedition Brigade hadn’t seized the Legion’s control core, to say nothing of eliminating the Halcyon, which was their initial objective. It wouldn’t have been too late to attack them afterward; in fact, if the Theocracy wanted to betray them that badly, they should have done it after they’d completed the mission—when they’d defeated the imminent threat of the Halcyon and possibly gotten hold of confidential information or the railgun’s wreckage.

After the operation concluded, the Expedition Brigade would be fatigued and unguarded. If the Theocracy were to attack them later tonight, when they were out of their Reginleifs, even the Eighty-Six would be captured without much resistance. Yes, even from the perspective of seizing the Eighty-Six themselves, turning on them after the operation was complete would have netted the Theocracy so much

more for that much less of an effort.

In which case, why? Why do it now and go to the trouble of inflicting needless losses on each other?

All the corridors they raced down had no signs of soldiers or guards. They made their way toward the base's hangar. The machine pistols they'd been given only had a limited number of bullets each, due to them having to be hidden, but they arrived without having fired a single one.

They gazed outside and saw the ashen open air leading up to the shutter. They couldn't cross through that terrain without protective clothing.

"Get into Vanadis!"

It was then that Lena received a transmission through the Para-RAID. It was from the captain of the HQ guard squadron, which they'd left behind as a reserve unit.

"We dived to come pick you up before you even called for us! Send me a transmission once you're all in; we're breaking through the shutter!"

"Yes, thank you!"

A subdriver climbed onto Vanadis's driver's seat and revved up the engine. Without even checking that everyone had grabbed onto something, he unflinchingly stomped on the pedal.

"Second Lieutenant Nana!"

"Aye, ma'am!"

Two heavy machine guns let out a high-pitched screech reminiscent of an electric saw. Its bullets tore through the metallic shutter in a matter of seconds. With the gunfire ceasing a moment later, Vanadis dived through the hole in the shutter with a shrill, loud *bang*.

Metallic fragments flew into the air. Inside the hangar, the Regineleifs greeted their queen's carriage, forming a defensive formation around it in the blink of an eye.

The sight of uniformed figures, carrying assault rifles, finally filing into the hangar, filled Vanadis's monitor.

Kurena could see the sight of Mika's unit, Bluebell, being blown away right below her through the Trauerschwan's optical sensor.

"Mika!"

It wasn't a direct hit on the cockpit. Her unit wasn't heavily damaged, either. But she was definitely injured. With its left flank torn away, Bluebell was stranded in place, and a consort unit approached it with a Juggernaut to tow it away. And even as they did, pearl-gray units closed in on them.

A transmission had just come in, informing that Rito was also injured and had to retreat to the back of the line. Kurena could only sit idly by, clenching her fists inside Gunslinger's cockpit, which had both its front and rear legs fixed into the giant railgun's cockpit block.

“...Why?”

They did this for some bastards who would trick and use them. To horrible people who would try to push the difficulty and pain of battle onto someone else and pretend it didn't exist.

Why is it always us?

She suddenly realized that the dense lump of emotion she'd been carrying in her heart was anger. It didn't seethe in her chest, nor did it burn in the pit of her stomach. It was cold and hard, like a foreign object that was stuck inside her and wouldn't go away. Like a frozen, clotted poison that clung to her from within.

It was an indignation that had been smoldering within her all throughout the Eighty-Sixth Sector and ever since.

“Why do we...always have to be the ones who fight...?!”

Protected by a squadron of Reginleifs, Vanadis escaped the corps command center and moved into the ashen wasteland. Vanadis wasn't without means of self-defense, but its 120 mm chain gun and heavy machine guns lacked power. Its mobility was also a far cry from what the Reginleifs were capable of. As such, the command vehicle wasn't meant for combat, and they needed to avoid any and all engagements.

The same held true for the guard squadron, which had been left behind as minimal backup in case of emergency. They sprinted through the ashen terrain, hiding behind any hills they could find so as to avoid combat with the Theocracy military. They had to search for some way to break through the corps's encirclement and try to regroup with the rest of their forces.

They'd managed to escape the enemy's base, but if Lena and the others were to be captured again, they could be used as hostages to pressure the Eighty-Six. And they also needed to collect the Armée Furieuse technicians and maintenance crew, who were located fifteen kilometers away. Lena could only pray they were fine.

“Second Lieutenant Oriya, Second Lieutenant Michihi! What's your status?!” Lena asked them through the Para-RAID.

“We're completely surrounded, Colonel!”

“The 3rd Division and the ambush regiment lines are thin at three o'clock! We're trying to break through from there!”

Frederica then chimed in with another report.

“The Theocracy's 2nd Army Corps is also beginning to move in our direction. They are still engaging the Legion, however, so

they cannot contribute to the siege... Having walked about the Theocracy's officers and soldiers while playing the part of an innocent child has proved to be useful."

That last comment made Lena blink a few times, as inappropriate as it may have been in this strained situation.

"Frederica... You can understand the Theocracy's language?"

Her ability allowed her to see the past and present of anyone she was acquainted with, but as far as Lena was aware of, it required that she at least knew their name and had exchanged words with them.

"Well enough to hold a basic conversation. I've spoken to them, but I've made it seem as if I cannot understand them very well. Like I said, I played the part of an innocent child, grinning as a helpless girl might in a foreign land. I repeated my name like an infant until they realized my intention and gave their own, and that was enough for my ability to work... This land is much too far from the Republic and the Federacy, after all. I presumed it would not hurt to err on the side of caution."

She likely didn't expect outright betrayal, but Frederica did assume that some kind of misunderstanding or miscommunication could lead to an unexpected situation.

"Have I proved myself useful, Vladilena?"

"Of course you have, Frederica... Thank you. You're a huge help."

She could feel Frederica nod in satisfaction. Lena, however, carefully considered her information. The 2nd Army Corps was moving in. Two regiments couldn't very well be expected to hold back an entire country's army. In terms of both time wasted and the airborne battalion's fatigue and remaining ammo, they couldn't let this last too long...

"—But, Colonel, wait."

Someone interjected. It was Mitsuda, one of the commanders of the artillery-configuration Regineif battalions. His voice had a hint of disgruntlement that he didn't try to hide, though it wasn't directed at Lena herself. He then carried on, his tone calmer and more collected.

"Let's say we have Shin's group pull back from the Halcyon. Can't we return after that?"

Lena stiffened and swallowed nervously. Mitsuda continued.

"I mean, Shin's group temporarily stopped the Halcyon, but it's still intact. If we just leave it there, won't the Theocracy's people have their hands full taking care of it? They called the Federacy for help because it was too much for them to handle, after all. So while they're occupied with taking it out on their own, we can go home."

This would save them from having to pointlessly fight the Theocracy, which would prevent them from taking needless losses in

that battle.

“Well...”

Could they do that? Yes. It would take some effort, but they could help Shin and the airborne battalion escape, evacuate the front lines in the chaos that would ensue, and leave the Theocracy. They’d have to blow up the Armée Furieuse and the Trauerschwan to dispose of them and not leave them behind to be seized by the enemy. But compared with fighting a hopeless battle against an enemy nation, it would save countless lives.

Mitsuda then spoke in a detached tone, making no effort to hide the bottomless disgust and resentment he felt.

“Yes, we take pride in fighting to the very end. And sure, if the Federacy wants to take advantage of our will to persevere, we’ll let them, so long as they help us to do it... But that doesn’t mean we want them to use us like it’s nothing, to force us into being martyrs for them.”

Upon hearing these words, Michihi shivered like a person who’d just had her thoughts read out loud. Rito tried to deny it, though part of him had to wonder about that. And Kurena simply agreed from the bottom of her heart.

That same doubt, frustration, and indignation smoldered in the heart of each of the Eighty-Six and was awakened by those words. After all, did they have a duty to fight for people like these? Or at least, for people like these, too? Just because fighting to the very end was in their nature, just because they took pride in doing so, it didn’t mean they would simply roll over and comply. When someone tricked them, turned their guns on them, and demanded they fight their battles for them, they had the right to refuse.

To begin with, they didn’t fight to protect anyone or save anything. That was true both in the Eighty-Sixth Sector and outside it. They didn’t fight for the Republic’s white pigs. They did it for their pride and their comrades.

They wouldn’t run, and they wouldn’t give up. They would fight to the very end, to the last breath they would sigh in their final moment—abiding to their pride as Eighty-Six. And if they ended up protecting the white pigs along the way, well, they wouldn’t like it, but they’d do what they must.

The Federacy used them as a spearhead to destroy key Legion positions, as a diplomatic tool, and as propaganda material. They knew that. The Federacy’s citizens only saw the Eighty-Six through the media and the news and thought they were some tragic heroes to be glorified. But on the other hand, the Federacy gave them much in

return, so they accepted this begrudgingly.

But they didn't want to be tools or propaganda material, and they definitely didn't want to be seen as heroes. They only ever fought for themselves. For their pride, for the kind of person they wanted to be and what they believed in. Not for other people.

And that was why, now that they'd left the Eighty-Sixth Sector, they wouldn't fight for people like these. Not now, or ever. So if they didn't fight here...if they just abandoned these people who left them to their fate...there wouldn't be anything wrong with that...right?

But the doubt that stirred the Eighty-Six for that one moment was torn apart. It was like the decisive slash of a razor-sharp blade.

“Undertaker to Vanadis.”

His clear, serene voice reached their ears—

“The airborne unit will resume its mission, as initially decided. We'll keep the battle zone under control until the Trauerschwan's in position.”

—declaring they would not abort the operation.

Lena, Kurena, and the child soldiers whispered his name, as if snapping out of a dream. They all held different feelings, but they all equally mouthed the name of the headless Reaper who once reigned over the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield. Of the war god who once led them.

“Shin...”

They hadn't eliminated the Halcyon yet. The operation was still underway.

The rain of buckshot forced them to keep clear of the Halcyon, but as he fought to once again close the distance, he continued speaking. Resonating with the entire armored division made his head throb, but he could bear it for a little longer.

Shin knew how they felt. He hated it as much as they did. He didn't want to fight for people who were no better than the Republic's white pigs, much less die for them. Especially now, when they'd come to realize they had the right to refuse... The right to say they didn't want to die.

However...

“I understand your anger. But if we ignore the Halcyon, it could appear on the Federacy's front next. And if we don't seize a commander unit's control core—the Legion's confidential information and the railgun itself—the Federacy won't have a future. This isn't an operation where we can afford to be consumed by our emotions and

quit.”

They couldn't forsake their chance to live on out of anger and indignation. Their lives simply weren't fickle and transient enough to allow for that anymore.

The Halcyon's control core wasn't an Imperial officer. Neither was the Noctiluca's core, nor were the “Shanas” that operated the railguns. None of them had the information the Federacy needed the most. But even so.

Mitsuda spoke. Not out of dissatisfaction or an intent to argue back, but like a child who'd lost their reason to be stubborn and insistent.

“But, Shin... But...”

“I already said it, Mitsuda. I understand your anger. It's not misplaced. But it's not worth gambling our lives over. If things really get dangerous, we'll consider retreating then.”

“...Roger.”

Mitsuda nodded through the Resonance, albeit still begrudgingly. Having confirmed this, Shin cut the Resonance with the entire unit. As soon as he did, he could clearly feel Raiden's bitter smirk over the Resonance.

“Well, it's not like returning from combat is as simple as Mitsuda puts it.”

The airborne unit worked under the assumption that the ground unit would handle eliminating the Legion on the front lines for them. Fighting the Halcyon was one thing, but having to fight their way out of the area with the Halcyon shooting them from behind could be a bit too difficult, especially since they couldn't count on the Theocracy's army for help.

“Yeah. All units, you heard me. We're resuming the operation.”

Everyone in the airborne unit shared Raiden's stance. None of them voiced any complaints, keeping up a strained sense of tension. The operation resumed. However, who was to say how long they'd have to wait for the Trauerschwan to assume its firing position now?

“Based on the analysis of the cooling system, we might not have to wait for the Trauerschwan to get into position to destroy the Halcyon, and if it's possible, we'll do it immediately. Until then, try not to waste ammo if you don't have to.”

Across both the Eighty-Sixth Sector's and the Federacy's battlefield, she followed him. She longed for him in a manner that bordered on religious faith. But listening to him now, Kurena could only react in disbelief.

“Why?”

Why did he keep saying the war was going to end, even in this situation? Why did he insist on having faith in this world? In a world that laughed as it gunned down her mother and father in cold blood? In a world that would sever the arm of an Eighty-Six who had his heart set on fighting to his dying breath?

The white pigs took your family away just the same. You saw Theo lose a hand just like I did. So why? How can you still do it?

For a long time now, there had been a decisive gulf, a crack, that had run between her and Shin. Between Eighty-Six like her and Eighty-Six like Shin. And now she saw it. The wall that stood between those who left the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and those who couldn't leave it—those who had been left behind.

“Are you going to leave us? Hey...”

Our Reaper. Or so I thought...

Are you going to abandon us?

When we used to be your comrades?

“The airborne unit will resume its mission, as initially decided. We'll keep the battle zone under control until the Trauerschwan's in position.”

Of all the things, she never expected this.

Hearing the resolute, dignified words of the Eighty-Six's captain, Hilnå couldn't help but widen her eyes and gawk in amazement.

It can't be. It can't. The Eighty-Six themselves are saying that? No... After all.

She couldn't stop the smile worming its way to her lips.

“See? Your war god, your Reaper says it, too, Eighty-Six.”

Neither Lena nor the Eighty-Six could see that smile, but it was terribly warped...and somehow self-deprecating.

“That's your role. Such is the will of the earth goddess and the fate granted to you by this world. You all know nothing but conflict. You have nowhere else to live. You will live on the battlefield, and there, you will also die. That is the one and only fate in store for you.”

Just like us.

Shin's words from across the Resonance were things they'd all thought but none of them had put into words. He had no time to debate the matter because the battle with the Halcyon was about to resume, and so Lena spoke in his place.

“All units. You don't have to see this as saving the Theocracy. You aren't heroes. You can and should fight for your own reasons.”

Making that call was a commander's duty. And she didn't want to

have the words he said be held against him.

“And even if you pride yourself on fighting until your dying breath, that doesn’t mean your *only* purpose is to fight. You’re not drones, and you’re not weapons. And you shouldn’t let that nonsense mislead you! However, we will complete this operation. We will destroy the Halcyon!”

If they were displeased or unhappy, then let it be held against her and not Shin. She was a queen living under the Eighty-Six. In place of never shedding her own blood on the field of battle, she was to remain calmer than her subordinates.

“And to that end, we must first break through this blockade! Cooperate with the Myrmecoleo Regiment and open a gap into the enemy’s encirclement!”

But as soon as she said this, she realized something about this plan was critically off. Breaking through a blockade. A complete encirclement.

Why?

An army is weaker when scattered. A losing army takes the majority of its losses during retreat. And that’s why, as a general rule, one doesn’t assume a formation that wouldn’t allow the enemy to escape at all. When pushed back, people are as prone to panic and defaulting to flight as animals are.

But if their avenue of escape is cut off and death stares them in the face, soldiers are driven to struggle to their last breath. And just like how animals are most dangerous when cornered, soldiers exhibit extraordinary ferocity once liberated from the fetters of inhibition and common sense.

Forcing the enemy into that kind of position would only result in more casualties for the attacking side.

That’s why resorting to surrounding your enemy is looked down upon. Unless one seeks to wipe out the enemy in its entirety, leaving an avenue of escape is essential. If the Theocracy really wanted to absorb the Eighty-Six into their army, blocking Kurena, Michihi, Rito, and the Expedition Brigade’s main force off with a full encirclement made no sense.

And on top of that, there was the odd timing of the surprise attack and the fact that Lena’s group hadn’t run into any of the enemy soldiers until they made their escape. They didn’t hold Lena and the control officers hostage. And the strangest point was that they were going to all this trouble, making enemies out of major powers like the Federacy and the United Kingdom, just for the sake of stealing away two regiments.

What if Hilnā’s objective wasn’t to get the Eighty-Six to surrender? Maybe this situation, full as it was of contradictions and

inconsistencies, wasn't the Theocracy army's will, but rather...

"...I know you're tapping into this, Hilnå," Lena said in a low voice, changing the radio's transmission to the Theocracy command center's wavelength.

Her tone was very much one of suppressed anger, as if she wouldn't feel whole with herself without saying this final comment.

"You heard what I just said, right? You're wrong, Hilnå. The Eighty-Six remain on the battlefield because of their pride—not because it's their fate. They don't fight because they believe conflict to be their only path. They're fighting to end this war!"

"No. We're not," Kurena spat out bitterly.

Because it was Lena speaking, she wasn't as annoyed as she could have been. But had anyone else said those words, she would have been furious.

They weren't fighting to *end the war*. Not all Eighty-Six thought the way Shin did. Lena just said that because she was around Shin all the time. *He* wanted to end the war, and Lena looked to him first and foremost.

Of course, Kurena thought that the end of this damnable war would be a good thing, too. She wanted to see Shin's dream realized—to see the war come to an end. But if it ended, she wouldn't have a place next to him, and she wouldn't be able to help him anymore.

But...

Kurena was confused by the way her thoughts were going around in circles. What did she want to do, really? The answer was quite simple. She wanted things to stay the way they were. To help Shin and all their comrades, here on the battlefield. At least here, she knew where she belonged...where she stood. Shin was so much more at ease now than he was in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and spending their days with their comrades was so much more pleasant. And to that end...

She recalled something Theo told her once.

It almost sounds like you don't want the war to end.

At the time, she said that wasn't what she meant. But that wasn't true.

It actually *was* what she meant.

"Does the war have to end...?"

I...

But as those words came to mind, something reached her ears like the rumbling of thunder that followed a blinding flash of lightning. As the flash tore through the night, this rumble shook the firmament.

"No!"

It was Hilnå.

“That cannot be! I cannot believe a Republic citizen, one of those *takers*, has the gall to say that!”

Hilnå shouted, as if billowing righteous fire at this argent queen who dared speak as if she knew it all.

You don't understand it. You've never understood the feelings of those who had everything taken from them—the utter fixation with which they cling to the only thing they have left.

“Fate must have driven the Eighty-Six! After all, were they not cast out from their motherland, the Republic, and forced to live on the battlefield? If war deprived them of anything and everything, if they had nothing but the scars of that deprivation to their name...then they cannot shed that fate! They cannot *heal* those scars!”

Without even realizing it, she'd grabbed hard onto her commanding baton. It felt as if that old nightmare was coming to life right before her very eyes.

Even ten years later, she still remembered the atrocity that overtook her family all too clearly.

“Because I'm the same! The same has happened to me! I could never forget the saints who propped me up to be a tragic figurehead! I won't forget what the Theocracy has done, how they turned me into a saint of war to ensure our people's unity in the face of calamity!”

“What are you talking about—?”

“My family, House Rèze, were all slain by the Legion at the beginning of the war.”

She could hear Lena's breath catch in her throat.

House Rèze—a bloodline of saints. Whenever war broke out, it was the duty of the members of House Rèze to serve as corps commanders or division commanders. But such commanders couldn't have possibly all been slain so soon after the war started.

“A young saint, with her entire family wiped out by the damnable Legion. Despite being a fragile adolescent girl, she would bring judgment upon the Legion. The symbol of the Theocracy, fighting nobly with anger in her heart. That's what they sought to make me into, and to do that...the Theocracy army abandoned my family.”

The corps command center was attacked by the Legion. The base's escort unit was drawn away from the command center at the time *coincidentally* due to mistaken orders, and the rescue unit was *coincidentally* stalled by an unforeseen ambush of Legion, failing to arrive on time.

At the time, young Hilnå was speaking to her family through a transmission. Her grandmother—the corps commander—her mother, her father, her grandfather, and her siblings—division commanders and staff officers—and her uncle and her aunt.

And despite it only being through a transmission, she had to

watch as her entire family was brutally slain.

The other saints called Hilnå over earlier that day. She was too young to enter the integrated command center herself, and she opened the transmission just that once so she could talk to her mother. And these saints stood aside, watching as she bore witness to the murder of her family.

She would never forget them. That nightmare. The things she saw. The vile, callous faces of her countrymen.

“My father, my mother, my grandmother, my uncle, and my brothers and sisters were all torn apart by the Legion. And the saints who allowed it to happen...said they made a painful decision and sacrificed so much, only to have overcome this torturous trial. They shed tears of joy all the while, drunk on their own sublimity.”

“My homeland stole my family from me, and so I will never love this country again. I have nothing but my fate as the saint of war, and the scars it etched upon me are something I won't let anyone take away. I can never relinquish them!”

Kurena felt as if the things Hilnå just said were shouted at her by her reflection in the mirror. The girl she'd thought was the same as the white pigs, the very personification of all that was wrong with the world, was just like them. She was a mirror image of the Eighty-Six.

She was a child who'd been denied her family and birthplace. She was a girl who had the war effort forced upon her. She was an infant left with nothing but this fate—this *pride* to live on the field of battle.

It was as if Hilnå had just popped the cork on everything she had been keeping bottled up, her golden eyes burning furiously.

Yes, that's right. Hilnå's right.

After having everything else taken away from her, Kurena couldn't let go of the one thing that gave her a sense of identity. Even if that something was her scars. Especially not...

“Don't tell me you can't understand that. You should be the *last* person trying to take this away from me.”

Shin should have carried those same scars. And he knew she didn't want to lose them, to have *even that* taken away.

You know I can't wish for the future, so...I don't want the war to end.

Don't take that away from me.

I can only exist on the battlefield. Don't force me to leave the one place I belong.

Hilnå's cry was like a scream. It was the scream of a helpless infant who had finally, finally found solidarity in another lost child. And now she was clinging to that ally, weeping and refusing to let go.

“I'm sure you of all people would know! You child soldiers who've

been forced to become living ghosts, wandering the battlefield and feeding on war! And you, the Headless Reaper who has been forced to offer salvation in a battlefield forsaken by the gods! You know that the world only takes and never gives! You know that raising up banners of virtue like *justice* and *righteousness* hold no meaning!”

Shin looked at the ground. There was a time when he felt the same way. Justice and righteousness held no meaning. He’d felt this back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, in the Spearhead squadron’s barracks, where he was predestined to die a meaningless death six months later.

At the time, he didn’t doubt it. He thought it was simply an eventuality, a truth of the world.

And here Hilnå was, saying the same things now. She was just like the Eighty-Six—a child cast out onto the field of battle by humanity’s malice. She now held up the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s truth as her banner.

Standing still and refusing to move. Trapped within the confines of that battlefield. Letting her scars consume her, rather than allowing them to heal.

And Lena, on her end, stood there with her eyes widened in shock. She was positive of it. What Hilnå had just said was...

A new blip appeared in one of Vanadis’s holo-windows, which had a map of the area displayed on it. The radar systems of the Reginleifs that were currently surrounded by the enemy identified that new unit, and they somehow managed to transmit it to Vanadis, despite the electromagnetic interference.

It did return an IFF signature. The was the scout platoon of the Theocracy’s 2nd Army Corps, I Thafaca. Upon seeing it, Lena called out to the unit they were about to make contact with—one of the Scimitar squadron’s units.

“Gremlin!”

The Theocracy’s unexpected betrayal, the interference of the ash in the air, and the knowledge that the airborne battalion was isolated behind enemy lines. All those came together to form confusion and panic, smoldering in the stomach of Gremlin’s Processor. And that was why when the proximity alert blared through the cockpit, they could only gasp in surprise.

They kicked away the Lyano-Shu creeping closer to them, but upon looking away, they suddenly spotted the bulky silhouette of a Fah-Maras behind the curtain of ash. Its canopy swung open, and a

human figure jumped out. Their insignia was that of a six-winged bird of prey—the Theocracy's 2nd Army Corps.

They're this close?!

The Processor's panic finally brought their thoughts to a boiling point. They reflexively fixed their machine gun's sights on the soldier clad in pearl-gray protective clothing, who, for whatever reason, hurriedly waved their hands in the air.

"Gremlin!" Lena shouted at them through the Sensory Resonance.
"Don't shoot!"

"?!"

They reflexively moved the muzzle, jumping away so as to not be shot first and creating distance between them. Only then did they fully realize that the soldier had disembarked their unit, discarding their means of attacking them. The soldier pointed repeatedly at their formless, masked, and goggled face, to which the Processor understood their intent and switched the frequency over to the Theocracy's wavelength.

The electronic interference that'd been weaved around the 3rd Army Corps failed to extend this far. The radio crackled loudly with static noise, and a young voice—not so far from the Processor's own age—spoke to them, stuttering in the Republic's tongue.

"We are not your enemies! Hear us out, Eighty-Six!"

After hearing this through the Resonance, Lena confirmed that her suspicion was correct.

So it really is just...

"Hilnå. This entire plot... You're the only one behind it, aren't you?"

This wasn't the Theocracy deciding to betray the Federacy. Hilnå was doing it *on her own*.

Their battle with the Theocracy's 8th Division and ambush regiment continued, but Michihi was still beset by confusion and doubt. And the longer the fighting went on, the more pronounced her inner conflict grew.

It was probably because she'd heard Lena's conversation regarding Hilnå's past. It felt like the girl's story echoed her own. It was the same absurdity that ruined the Eighty-Six's lives. Ten years ago, when the Legion War broke out, Michihi and her comrades were all young children. They were suddenly cast out to the internment camps, where they were torn from their parents, grandparents, and siblings. They were sentenced to battle as parts of a drone and forced to fight and die all so that the Republic's Alba could reap the benefits.

Every one of them had been cruelly deprived of their homes and families, of the innocence that allowed one to even dream of a future.

And that happened here, too. In this country far to the west. And maybe it was happening everywhere.

What am I fighting, really?

That doubt made Michihi's hands cramp up. She realized she wasn't moving the controls or pulling the trigger as fast as usual, but she couldn't help it. It felt like she was fighting her own reflection in the mirror, and even a seasoned Eighty-Six soldier such as herself was hesitating.

I can't think about that. I have to focus on breaking this blockade and getting away.

She shook her head, somehow swallowing an outburst of childish helplessness that made her want to cry.

The Fah-Maras under the enemy unit's commander were accompanied by a force of Lyano-Shu drones. If she were to destroy the Fah-Maras commanding them, the Lyano-Shu would be stopped at once, so the fastest way of ending this would be to aim at the Fah-Maras.

But both Michihi and her comrades all concentrated on destroying the Lyano-Shu instead. Rather than aiming at the manned unit, they instead focused fire on the remote-controlled extensions. They didn't want to kill other people. Fighting to the very end may have been their pride, but that didn't mean they were willing to murder others.

Having spent their lives warring against the Legion, this was the Eighty-Six's first battle against fellow humans. This wasn't a fight they wanted any part in.

They didn't want to stoop to murder.

Another Lyano-Shu fixed its recoilless gun's sights on her. If she were to jump away like she usually did, her legs would get caught in the ash. Forcefully fastening her cramped grip on the control sticks, she decided to stand her ground and turned her autocannon's muzzle.

The Reginleif's gun turret was limited in terms of its elevation degree, but it was capable of revolving. It was faster than the Theocracy's units, which had to turn their entire frames along with their turrets.

She squeezed the trigger.

The shells hit their target, focusing on the joints of its forelegs first. As the enemy unit lost its footing, it crumpled down, and Michihi finished it off with another barrage. Aiming at the legs first was Michihi's usual combat style, honed through fighting the Legion, who were far more agile than the Juggernauts.

While 40 mm autocannon fire was powerful, it lacked the destructive force of an 88 mm tank shell. The autocannon fire tore the

Lyano-Shu apart, but it still retained its shape. But then its frontal armor flew open, like a cockpit's canopy. And from within it rolled a small hand, like the tattered arm of a doll.

Huh...?!

Michihi widened her eyes in horror.

It was the small hand of a child. Was this...a self-propelled mine? But what would a Legion unit be doing inside a Lyano-Shu?

Michihi was beyond confused. Thoughts flooded her mind in a state of uncontrollable mayhem. The reality of what she just had witnessed was beyond doubt and required no further clarity, yet she refused to believe her eyes all the same. Her instincts drove her to reject the realization—screaming at her to deny the truth.

The Lyano-Shu's frontal armor—no, its *canopy*—popped off. And inside, lying inside the *cockpit* that had been torn apart by autocannon fire...

...were the remains of a little girl, not even ten years of age.

CHAPTER 5

AND THE PIPER ADVANCED, AND THE RATS AND THE CHILDREN FOLLOW'D

“No... It can't be...!”

No one could blame Michihi as her unit, Hualien, took a stunned step back. At that moment, all the Juggernauts immediately ceased combat. The Reginleifs had a data link feature. So long as they remained within a short distance of one another, they could share data even when under electromagnetic interference. And so the members of her battalion, who were clumped up next to her, and Rito's own battalion, who were fighting nearby, all received that footage.

The footage of a young girl's corpse within the Lyano-Shu that Hualien had just destroyed.

They were under the impression that these were extension drones connected to the Theocracy's primary Feldreß. They were so small that no one would have believed there could actually be living humans inside. But that girl was likely a pilot. They could hardly register that she was a person due to the terrible condition her body was now in. Atop her head, which had been partially severed, were two blond braids.

Of course, this gruesome sight wasn't something they were wholly unfamiliar with. The Juggernauts they once used to fight the Legion were essentially walking coffins, so all the Eighty-Six had already seen their comrades' bodies blown apart by tank shells, charred by anti-tank missiles, or decimated by heavy machine gunfire.

After witnessing such tragedy so frequently, it was a sight they would be glad to never see again.

So what made them all freeze up wasn't the grisly state of the corpse. It was the fact that this young child's body reminded them so much of themselves.

Even though they were the ones who had painted this picture, the Eighty-Six froze.

The data link had just barely managed to overcome the interference and transmit that footage over to Vanadis as well.

"...Oh my God."

Lena was speechless. It was too much. It was precisely because this was the exact same way the Republic treated the Eighty-Six that she found it so hard to believe.

A weapon that was said to be an autonomous drone was, in fact, piloted by people. By children.

Could anything be more absurd?

The only ones to have successfully developed a fully autonomous combat machine were, as far as Lena knew, the late Giadian Empire. Even the United Kingdom—where the Mariana Model, the basis for the Legion's artificial intelligence, was invented—used Barushka Matushkas.

The Theocracy was technologically inferior compared with those two countries, and so they couldn't have possibly developed a functional drone within the last eleven years.

But still, the Lyano-Shu was a mere one hundred twenty centimeters long. It was even smaller than Frederica was. And so Lena had been convinced that no one could have been inside it.

But if the pilot was a child younger than Frederica, who was in her early teens, or even Svenja, who was approaching ten...

"...!"

The Lyano-Shu's small size was owed to the fact that it was an impromptu, hastily cobbled-together Feldreß.

"They made them small because they were planning on putting *children* in them from the start...! It minimizes the unit's surface area and saves on raw material! This is...awful! They're using people—children—like drone parts...!"

Hilnå shrugged indifferently at Lena's accusation.

"We never said the Lyano-Shu were *unmanned* drones. And a soldier of the Republic, you, who forced the Eighty-Six to be drone parts, have no right to criticize us."

“So what?! That doesn’t mean you can just— You’re putting children into Feldreß, for heaven’s sake...!”

“We don’t have a choice... The Theocracy hardly has any adult soldiers left.”

Everyone who followed her. The corps’s staff officers. The commanders of the divisions, regiments, and battalions. And the pilots of what few units they had left of their legitimate Feldreß, the type 5 Fah-Maras. Everyone but them...

“The soldiers of our country—our spears of god, Teshat, as we call them—have all been driven to near extinction by these eleven years of war.”

Frederica furrowed her brow as she sat within the Trauerschwan’s cramped leg control chamber.

“I did not tell you because you did not ask, Vladilena. Nor did I tell the Eighty-Six, nor Bernholdt and the Vargus. I thought it would be a most unpleasant revelation for you all.”

Zashya shook her head bitterly, her Tyrian purple eyes clouded over with hatred. She was seated inside her Alkonost’s thinly armored cockpit, hidden in the spire of a religious structure in the city ruins.

“Yes... Prince Viktor firmly commanded me not to mention it so long as there wasn’t a need... In fact, it is because this country is so radically *different* that His Highness couldn’t come here.”

“Noirya forbids bloodshed,” Frederica said. “Raising a hand to your fellow human and shedding their blood is seen as a sin that can never be washed away. That applies not only to Shekha, the adherents of the Noirya faith, but also to Aurata and the people of the Theocracy. One must not spill the blood of pagans, of people of different ethnic groups, and of other nations. Anyone and everyone is under the sacred protection of Noirya. Even if someone—whoever they may be—were to raise their sword against the Holy Theocracy, a Shekha could never strike back in retaliation.

“But all countries need an army to keep their citizens safe. At first, they hired soldiers from the western nations, but even still, they were the people of another country. They prioritized their homelands over the Theocracy and weren’t seen as trustworthy.

“So the Theocracy realized it was necessary to organize an army from its people. And yet Noirya is the national religion. All its people abided by its precepts, and so none of the Theocracy’s citizens were allowed to spill the blood of another human being. And so to resolve this contradiction, they decided that *the soldiers who will defend the*

Theocracy are not to be counted as its citizens. They are regarded as living, moving weapons sent by the faith's earth goddess to defend the Shekha."

Hence, the spears of God: the Teshat. They were regarded not as humans, but as divine armaments. And so even though they were born to the Theocracy, the precepts did not apply to them. They were not Shekha, and so they were allowed to violently oppose any invaders without tarnishing the Theocracy's faith.

"The Theocracy considers itself to be a holy land. A land that cannot stain the hand of God with blood. That is why both the United Kingdom and the old Empire once called the Theocracy a *mad* country."

"The Giadian Empire, the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, and the other countries were all militaristic, holding up martial prowess as a symbol of pride. They likely found the Theocracy's teachings, which saw sin in the possession of an army, to be unacceptable. The Republic of San Magnolia prided itself on democracy, where national defense was the duty of the people and regarded as a symbol of patriotism. They likely would have found the Theocracy's practices unnatural as well. Our country does not share the same viewpoint on warfare, which makes us seem like outliers."

The mad country, Noiryranaruse. Hilnå had only ever heard the rumors of how her country was perceived. For as long as she could remember, the far west was cut off from the other nations by the Legion's ranks and the Eintagsfliege's disruption. And because of that, it was the values of those other countries, and not the Theocracy's, that struck Hilnå as strange.

"But for those of this land...these laws do not seem strange at all. In the Theocracy, the family you are born into decides your future profession, your marriage prospects, and the rest of your life. One's fate is decided at birth. And that is why the children born to the Teshat workshops see it as their natural lot in life to serve as the goddess's spears."

The Theocracy's regime tied bloodlines that had certain physical attributes to the professions they would be best suited to. And so to keep up the strength of their army, those with the traits and qualities that made them most suited to being soldiers were supplied periodically to "workshops," where many Teshat women served as "weaponsmiths." But otherwise, there was no difference between Shekha households and Teshat workshops. A rather distinct arrangement.

"We do not act like the Republic did when it branded the Eighty-

Six as livestock in human form. The Teshat may not be seen as humans, but they are regarded as divine messengers. They are treated with respect and reverence in their daily lives. Those who become officers are to handle diplomacy and are provided the higher education needed to do so. The Shekha have no military power of their own, so had we Teshat been dissatisfied with how we were treated, we would have rebelled and toppled the Theocracy long ago... But neither we nor our ancestors were displeased. Not for centuries..."

The Theocracy didn't enable one to freely pursue their profession. The very concept of it did not exist in this country. And so there was no practical difference between the citizens and the warrior class of the Teshat. For other countries, this came across as highly unusual, but the Shekha and the Teshat themselves didn't regard the way they were treated as bad.

All things considered, this was the result of their education. And education could be seen as brainwashing in a way.

And so they weren't discontent.

After ten years of fighting, most of the adult Shekha had perished in the Legion War, and even the elders, who were seen as the reserves, were wiped out. This brought the Theocracy to a state where they had no choice but to send Shekha who would normally still be in their combat training out to the front lines. And even now, the Shekha did not rue their lot in life.

"...until that doctrine was overturned."

From the perspective of the 3rd Army Corps's Shekha, Hilnå's words and the fire burning within them came across as a denunciation. Especially to the control officers, the staff officers, and the Fah-Maras's pilots, who were older than she was.

The majority of the Theocracy's ranks were Lyano-Shu pilots, children younger than age ten. But those in command of them were all youths, at best in their midteens or around the age of twenty. Very few people within the entirety of the corps were older than that, and everyone else had died already. Eleven years of fighting the Legion had worn them thin to the point of nearly breaking.

And they were told it was their fate to do so. To protect the pure, unblemished chosen and to obey the saint who stood as their general. And so they lived their lives. Having been told that this was their fate, they obediently and reverently obeyed.

Alongside the young saint who led them, for it was *her* fate to do so.

And yet that doctrine...

“With last year’s large-scale offensive, the only surviving godsend were the infants. And this made it clear that the Theocracy’s days are numbered. The saints gathered to discuss a solution, and they chose to discard the doctrine. They decided to conscript the Shekha, who, until now, had never fought because of their faith.”

...was overturned by none other than the Theocracy itself.

Hilnå spoke, her golden eyes like stars, burning with celestial fury, and her gaze like incandescent flames. She’d swept her right arm through the air almost reflexively, making her command baton’s glass bell chime and the silk of her sleeve rustle.

“Insisting that this was the fate of the Teshat, they drove us to near extinction. But when it came time for others to step to the chopping block, they claimed it was not fate that brought them there. After saying that it was our goddess-given role to live upon the battlefield and using that as an excuse to steal everything away from us, they had the gall to take even *that* fate away! To spurn it!”

That *fate* took everything away from Hilnå. The writ of fate was what spurred generations of Shekha across centuries to taint themselves with blood and fall upon the swords of their enemies in place of their countrymen.

All they had left was the fate of life on the battlefield. And *fate* was a heavy word. It carried enough weight to make the fact that they essentially had everything else stolen from them seem trivial in comparison.

But the Theocracy overturned that fate. They scorned it, called it worthless, and treated it as something that could be taken away on a whim. They cherished *their own* lives so much that even after denying Hilnå and the Shekha anything else, they once again took *everything* from them.

“And that’s unforgivable. We won’t stand for it. Not us, who had everything stolen away in the name of war. Our fate, to fight until the very end, is the only thing we have left. Should they succeed in snatching even that from us...then we will have truly lost it all.”

And so, if the alternative was to lose everything they had...

“Let the Theocracy fall. Let everything be lost. If they hold their lives so dear to them, let them perish. Let the war rage on forever.”

Let any hope for survival crumble away.

Let the extended hand of salvation be severed.

Let everything and everyone be lost forever.

“This time, we shall be the ones to do the taking.”

To protect the one thing they had left—their duty as soldiers—even as it slipped from their collective grasp. This was their way of repaying the country that had raised them to live and breathe war and then discarded them.

A grand feat of mass suicide.

The mirror shattered.

A chill ran through Kurena.

“That’s not...”

The pride to fight on. The pride the Eighty-Six clung to even when they were deprived of everything else. The feeling was nearly identical.

They had lost everything on the field of battle, and the pride that kept them alive in that hellscape was all they had to give them form, purpose, and identity. In the end, they weren’t even allowed to wish for anything else.

It was identical right down to the dark, faint, and unspoken desire to see the war never end.

But as near identical as it was, it was still different.

“Letting everything and everyone die—that’s not what I...!”

It wasn’t what she wanted. But perhaps, there was a time when she did feel that way.

That young saint carried an obsessive delusion that was born of the pride of the battlefield, clinging to nothing else. Until in the end, she cast everything and anything away. It was what Kurena would have been had she truly wished for nothing but the battlefield.

In other words, Hilnå was who Kurena could have been. And that realization made Kurena shudder.

It made her aware of—and thus unable to deny—her own desire. To wish away the future, even if it shattered the future that *he* wished for.

“...No.”

She shook her head desperately. No. She didn’t want that. Even if she had wished for it at some point, right now, she didn’t want everything to be destroyed.

She didn’t want to wish for that.

“We...we wouldn’t want that ever...!”

“I won’t say I can’t sympathize with you, but what does that have to do with what you’re doing right now?” Gilwiese cut into Hilnå and Lena’s exchange with a sigh.

This was very much a level of selfishness he couldn’t stand listening to. If Hilnå hadn’t been a kid, he wouldn’t have even wanted to feel for her. She must have truly been a hurt, pitiful child. But what did screaming so theatrically about her scars and holding them up like justifications really achieve?

“To us, the Federacy military, everything you just said is honestly none of our business. If infighting within the Theocracy is what you want, then go ahead, tear each other apart. You said it yourself earlier. You could have gathered up the Teshat and led them in revolt against your country.”

If they were pressed for soldiers so badly that they had to resort to sending small children to the battlefield, the Theocracy would have been powerless to resist an army corps turning against them. In fact, they didn't even have to actively revolt. All they needed was to allow the Legion through and let them reduce the Theocracy to ashes for them.

But Hilnå didn't do any of that.

“Why are you involving the Federacy soldiers? Why involve the Eighty-Six—people who had been treated the same as you? Why throw that entire performance earlier, asking us to defect and making it look like the Theocracy betrayed us?”

Hilnå regarded him with curiosity. *Major Günter, yes? Commander of the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment... How can a commander be so dense?*

“I said *everyone* and *everything*, did I not?”

Everything. Surely, he didn't think she only meant taking away the Theocracy's life.

“If we were to drive our country to ruin for not wanting to have the war taken away from us...we would be seen as fools for such a reason. No one would weep for us. But everyone sympathizes with the Eighty-Six. Everyone pities them, and if they were to die, everyone would offer up their tears in tribute, wouldn't they?”

She'd heard that was what happened in other countries when the atrocities of the Eighty-Sixth Sector came to light. The Republic that had forced that tragedy upon the Eighty-Six was branded with stigma that it might never clear itself from.

“They are the child soldiers who everyone pities so much and who went to help the Theocracy out of the kindness of their hearts. But that Theocracy betrayed them, putting them to the sword for fighting back. It leaves a bitter taste in your mouth, doesn't it? It would make everyone burn with indignation, weep bitter tears, and blame the Theocracy to no end. A truly enjoyable, ideal tragedy, no?”

“So you did this to besmirch the Theocracy's name.”

“Yes. And...”

Let the Theocracy be loathed by all.

Let their honor and dignity burn to ash.

Let them be branded traitors.

Let any trust and faith they have be lost.

May they never find aid.

May the Legion devour all that they are.

May everyone fear their betrayal.

And...may the *Federacy* lose the faith of its people.

“...if Federacy citizens were to blame the Federacy’s regime for the sacrifice of those child soldiers, your country’s government would grow wary of betrayal and hesitate to enact justice... All other countries would lose the power to defend themselves and fall one after another.”

Hilnå spoke those words almost hopefully. As if daydreaming. Like a girl trying to will her desired future into existence.

“And if that happens, it could all end... All humanity could be driven to extinction.”

After a long, stunned silence, Gilwiese sighed.

“—An immature prospect. Childish, even.”

“Well, since Lena figured it out, they could check the communication records later, which might absolve the Theocracy,” Hilnå admitted.

Speaking in a way that would allow the Federacy’s Reginleifs and Vánagandr to record everything backfired on Hilnå. She did pretty much admit to trying to make it seem like the Theocracy was attempting to usurp the Federacy’s soldiers. If all she wanted was to maximize the number of losses, she shouldn’t have spared Lena and the control officers back in the command center.

“But either way, so long as someone is sacrificed, it’s all the same... If many Eighty-Six were to die, and the Federacy were to discover this record, you should very much hope they find it believable. Because to me...”

Hilnå chuckled.

“...it sounds like nothing more than a weak excuse.”

Hilnå’s wish was so utterly childish that Lena couldn’t help but scoff at it. Like a cruel, merciless goddess, wielding the sword of judgment and condemnation.

“Hilnå. All that is assuming that after you wipe out the Expedition Brigade, the Federacy will even listen to anything you have to say.”

Hilnå’s voice wavered in misunderstanding.

“Wireless communications in this battlefield are blocked by the jamming.”

“Yes. Just like the Republic was closed off from every direction.”

And having *seen it*, Frederica spoke. She, who utilized her ability to peer into the past and present of anyone she’d spoken to, had used her power to observe the Theocracy’s 2nd Army Corps in advance.

“It seems they’re coming, Vladilena. The cavalry you’ve been waiting for is almost here.”

A voice then echoed across the battlefield. It wasn’t through the radio, which was still jammed, but it came loudly from a speaker. It was littered with noise, with the speaker’s interior damaged from exposure to ash and dust, but it had a certain timbre to it. Like the sound of water dripping into an earthen pot.

“This is the corps commander for the 2nd Army Corps—I Thafaca—and the first holy general, Totoka, speaking.”

This group was still supposed to be far away. He was broadcasting through the scouting unit’s high-output speakers, which were meant for psychological warfare.

“We have heard and accepted the Federacy’s declaration. We view your quick-wittedness and goodwill favorably, wise queen of the Strike Package.”

Hilnå gasped in astonishment.

“Why...?! How could the Federacy react so quickly?!”

Hilnå had only jammed the *radio communications*. But the Federacy never told the Theocracy about *that technology*. And since the Federacy was so adamant and firm about keeping that information under wraps, Lena assumed they were being cautious of something. To that end, she didn’t tell Hilnå anything, even when she treated her with such kindness.

They were likewise forbidden from disclosing Shin’s ability and the Sirins’ existence. Vika, the prince of the United Kingdom, didn’t participate and instead sent Zashya in his place. And finally, Zelene, whom they didn’t shy away from carrying along to the Fleet Countries, wasn’t brought here to the Theocracy. Knowing all that made it perfectly clear that Lena wasn’t to trust this country’s commanders.

She knew Hilnå and the Teshat treated her with respect, but even so—Lena was, first and foremost, the Strike Package’s tactical commander. Their Bloodstained Queen. The Eighty-Six were her comrades and subordinates, and keeping them safe was her first priority.

“We have a technology we never told you about called the Para-RAID. A communication device capable of communicating even through the Eintagsfliege’s jamming. The Federacy has been keeping tabs on this entire situation from the start.”

And it proved useful in a way they didn’t anticipate; the Federacy was able to contact the Theocracy’s government and apply pressure on them, so as to keep the fighting from lingering and prevent any casualties. In addition, in order to keep the Federacy’s transmissions from going through the Legion’s territory, it had to be relayed through the United Kingdom. This meant Roa Gracia had received news of what happened here as well.

Diplomatically speaking, even if the fighting was to stop right there and then, the Theocracy would still be in a compromised position for allowing one of its generals to do something as scandalous as this. But since the Federacy was perfectly aware of the circumstances, the Theocracy likely wouldn't have any sanctions placed against it.

"Your plot's been completely undone, Hilnå. You've lost. The Theocracy won't fall. You won't use the Federacy as the vanguard for your childish ambitions."

"..."

"Order your soldiers to surrender. Please. There's no point to fighting any longer."

The 2nd Army Corps's commander continued. His voice also sounded terribly young.

"Surrender, Rêze. Do so now, and your punishment won't be as severe... The Theocracy forbids spilling blood. We do not wish to see atrocities committed upon our countrymen."

But Hilnå suddenly smiled with blatant scorn.

"You say that now, after everything that's been done...? If you want this to stop, abandon your teachings here and now. They could very well be thrown away tomorrow anyway."

A silence hung between them, before the 2nd Army Corps's commander sighed once.

"Very well... Second Holy General Himmelnåde Rêze, commander of the 3rd Army Corps, Shiga Toura, and all your subordinates. The Noirya Faith and the Holy Theocracy of Noiryaruse hereby acknowledge you as insurgents. We will henceforth deliver punishment for your crimes. You are hereby sentenced to death."

"...!"

Lena gritted her teeth. The corps commander continued coldly, perhaps unaware of her feelings or maybe simply choosing to disregard them.

"All Federacy and Expedition Brigade units—you are free to open hostilities against them. The Federacy will not be held accountable for any casualties you may inflict upon the insurgents."

Gilwiese's response was chilling, as if to imply they didn't need his approval to know they wouldn't be blamed for this.

"Roger that. Allow us to show off by suppressing the insurgents before you even arrive."

But Lena, in contrast, didn't order the Eighty-Six to destroy them, even though the first holy general had given them permission to do so. Was it really the only way? They may have been their enemies, but they were still human beings. Children.

Even if they had to fight, if they could simply take Hilnå captive, maybe they could minimize casualties—

"Don't bother," Hilnå said with a sneer, as if seeing through her intent. "The Teshat only obey the voice of a saint."

Hers was a desperate voice, like that of a defeated old woman. Even the reverberations of that laughter and voice felt unique, like the

tinkling of water droplets. Not unlike the tone of the first holy general. That unique vocal quality that saints possessed must have been what the Teshat obeyed.

Lena clenched her fists. In that case, if they could regroup with the 2nd Army Corps and their general, his voice could bid them to stop. He didn't give the order to cease fighting earlier, but it couldn't be that he'd be the only one able to call things off.

Because if that was the case, if a corps commander were to die in battle, there'd be no one left to take over their position. With that in mind, Hilnå couldn't be the sole survivor of her family. The Theocracy couldn't have taken that risk. That the cease-fire order had not come yet could have simply been due to the *transmission's sound quality being poor* because of the damaged speaker, to the point where his voice wouldn't be clear enough to bid them to stop.

But maybe if they were to use the wireless communications systems that the Theocracy always used...

She would need to confirm this with the 2nd Army Corps, and to do that, they had to regroup.

"Vanadis to all units. Break the blockade. We need to cooperate with the 2nd Army Corps—"

But then suddenly, a voice spoke back to her. It was someone's voice, reaching her through the Para-RAID. An Eighty-Six's voice... No, perhaps it stood for all the Eighty-Six's voices.

"No."

It was a reckless, panicked, frightened...and childish voice.

"No. *Don't shoot me.*"

As opposed to *Don't make me shoot them.*

Lena gasped, and she then clenched her teeth hard.

That's right. It would be *Don't shoot me*. The Eighty-Six had been sent to the internment camps back when they were as young as the Lyano-Shu pilots, if not younger. At those tender ages, they were exposed to violence and verbal abuse and treated like prisoners or livestock. People in their homeland's Prussian-blue uniforms thrust guns at them when they were that little.

Yes, the priest told her as much. Children, at ages seven or eight, were exposed to overwhelming violence that they were powerless to resist. It must have been a traumatic experience. Some of them had seen their family and friends slaughtered and borne witness to their parents dropping dead before their very eyes.

The Eighty-Six couldn't help but overlap the image of themselves and the terror that had been etched onto their souls with the young soldiers in front of them. They couldn't bring themselves to shoot

them.

They couldn't help hearing it. The weeping of *their own younger selves*, begging not to be shot.

"No...even if that wasn't the case..."

Shin believed he wouldn't be able to bring himself to shoot either way, be they an adult soldier or a child soldier his age. He could still maintain his composure, if only because he and the airborne battalion were fighting the Halcyon and weren't facing any human opponents. But he'd never imagined it. Facing a human being on the battlefield—slaying a fellow human in war.

Shooting another person was not a foreign concept for Shin. He'd shot untold numbers of his comrades, who lay grievously injured but still alive. He granted them the release of death. There were times on the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield, and indeed, even in the Federacy, whenever it was necessary.

But he'd never killed a human out of malice—someone he saw as an *enemy*. Imagining it chilled him down to the pit of his stomach. The first time he had to shoot another Eighty-Six to death, he was frightened. The act of pointing a tool of murder on another person sickened him.

So having to do it, without the intention of giving someone the peace of death or to prevent them from being taken away by the Legion, was unthinkable.

Fighting to the very end. They had said those words so many times already, without so much as a hint of concern or guilt. But now Shin realized they could only do that because the whole time, they were up against the Legion—lifeless, mechanical ghosts.

"We can't shoot them. We can't fight...other people."

As the Reginleifs stood stock still, the battle of the Myrmecoleo Regiment against the Theocracy's 3rd Army Corps's 8th Division and the ambush regiment was only intensifying. In fact, it seemed to be swinging in Myrmecoleo's favor.

"Even after an ambush and a blockade, and even with Feldreß optimized for this ashen battlefield, this is all they can manage."

The battle was so one-sided that Gilwiese couldn't help but utter this exasperated remark. They were walking all over them. It was a massacre.

The Vánagandr couldn't match the absurdly high fidelity of the Löwe or the Dinosauria, but it was still graced with the honor of being the primary armored weapon of the Federacy, an heir to a military

power and a current world superpower.

It was equipped with a powerful 120 mm turret and thick 600 mm steel sheet plates. Its massive output allowed its full weight of fifty tonnes to move at velocities approaching a hundred kmh. In many ways, it was likely one of humanity's most powerful armored weapons.

The Theocracy had an aversion to battle, and so they developed the Fah-Maras solely for self-defense purposes. Such defensive units and the impromptu weapons that were the Lyano-Shu were no match for the Vánagandrs.

In their attempt to find their bearings, the Fah-Maras floundered over the ash like fish washed ashore. The Vánagandrs closed in on them like hungry wolves, blowing them away with point-blank shots. Having depleted their barrels, the Lyano-Shu were powerless as they were exposed to the roars of 120 mm smoothbore guns, the screeching of 12.7 mm revolving machine guns, and the staccato of heavy assault rifles.

“Enemy suppressed. They’re so helpless that it’s almost a buzzkill, Mock Turtle.”

“They’ve got the environmental and numerical advantage, but they’re not using it. They’re uncoordinated, and their skill is lacking.”

“They’re like a bunch of toy rats. All they do is run around in circles, and they’re not thinking one bit.”

“Look down on rats, and they’ll bite you. Don’t be careless, especially around the Fah-Maras. Their main gun is strong enough to bust through a Vánagandr if it hits you in the flank or the back.”

There weren’t many Fah-Maras deployed, and so they weren’t much of a threat. Still, unlike the Lyano-Shu, which was so small that it could only be piloted by a child, the Fah-Maras was a bona fide armored weapon that had been in use since before the Legion War. They were piloted by the older Teshat—though, based on what Hilnå said, they would mostly be in their late teens. And since they were older, they had more combat experience, and they served both as the enemy’s armored forces’ strongest source of firepower and as their commanders.

Those points made the Vánagandrs single them out and focus fire on them. And indeed, Gilwiese spoke as Mock Turtle faced a Fah-Maras it had shot. It lay crumpled on the ground, black smoke rising from the blasted flank of its cockpit block.

A group of Lyano-Shu flocked around Mock Turtle as their formation fell apart. They weren’t rushing to deliver a swift counterattack, nor were they running for cover, fearing it would go after them next.

They were simply so overwhelmed that they stood rooted in place, or perhaps, they broke formation out of fear. Some Lyano-Shu even turned around carelessly, gawking at the enemy unit that had defeated their commander. Like young, doe-eyed children who looked around only to realize that their older sibling had just disappeared somewhere.

Oh, Gilwiese realized bitterly. That's why.

This was part of the reason he and the Eighty-Six initially mistook the Lyano-Shu for drones. Not only were they too small for the average person to pilot, but each and every action they performed was also terribly slow and stiff. It felt like everything they did, from moving forward to firing their weapons, had a time lag to it. As if their every action required explicit instruction. It was a lack of flexibility one wouldn't expect of a trained soldier.

Like spring-powered mechanical mice, *incapable of thinking on their own.*

Inside those unsightly anti-tank guns were nothing more than young children, infants—soldiers in name only.

“All units. The Fah-Maras are the brains of the enemy units, and the Lyano-Shu are nothing more than mice that follow the tune of their flute. They can't move without anyone to issue them orders. Focus on taking out the Fah-Maras and then wipe out the Lyano-Shu.”

“Roger that.”

Before long, the cinnabar units gathered around the larger pearl-gray birds. As Gilwiese predicted, the Lyano-Shu fell into a state of stunned, flustered panic without their commanders. Screams erupted from their external speakers. The regiment couldn't understand what they were saying, but it was clear from the young shouting that they'd regressed to being confused, bewildered, and terrified children.

Help me. Save me. Brother. Sister. Don't leave me. I don't want to be alone.

For a second, Gilwiese gasped. Even without looking, he could feel Svenja curl up behind him. Stifling that emotion, he repeated his orders.

“Sweep them up.”

Said sweep developed into a competition for speed among the Myrmecoleo Regiment's individual companies and battalions. They fought over who could advance and suppress their enemies faster. The battlefield became a hunting ground, where everyone vied over prey and glory. Cheers and laughter filled the ashen front.

A barrage of 120 mm APFSDS shells traveled through the air at 1,650 meters per second, capable of tearing through 600 mm armored

steel sheet plates. They were effectively moving lumps of kinetic energy. Even if they failed to penetrate the Feldreß armor itself, the force behind them would still tear the frail human body inside to shreds. Not even a corpse would remain in the wake of the blast, sparing their attackers from having to bear witness to the children's remains.

Seeing the Eighty-Six exhibit weakness and avoid fighting only served to stir the Myrmecoleo Regiment's forces forward.

Do you see now? The Eighty-Six aren't really warriors. They're cowards without a shred of resolve. But we're true warriors. True heirs to the Empire's noble blood and pride, valiant heroes who bring honor to our pedigree.

They laughed aloud, competing for who could claim the most kills and declaring their names in shouts through their external speakers to the enemy leaders in the Fah-Maras.

Like nobles out on a sport hunt, or the knights of old rushing across the field of battle.

Maddened bloodlust descended upon the battlefield.

Seeing this, the Eighty-Six stood stock-still. Not out of fear of the carnage enacted by these knights, but out of terror toward the traumatic event taking place before them. This wasn't battle anymore. It was a massacre. One-sided slaughter.

A vivid recreation of the moment their own scars were carved into their flesh and souls.

When the Eighty-Six were shipped to the internment camps, they had guns fixed on them in the exact same manner. They didn't realize it at the time, but the ones doing it were the soldiers of their own country—the people who would normally be tasked with defending them.

Suddenly, those same soldiers rained physical and verbal abuse on them, pointing their weapons at them with scorn and malice.

They killed people to coerce and scare others into submission. Some saw them shoot living, breathing humans dead out of malicious amusement or a sick sense of humor. The victims could have been their parents or siblings, maybe friends or neighbors. And they were powerless to resist that absurd violence. All they could do was be violated and overwhelmed by it all.

“...No. Not this. No!”

They couldn't fight them. Not humans—not children. They couldn't kill their own past selves. And more importantly than that...

“...We need to stop this.”

They had to bring an end to this atrocity. They couldn't stand to

see these images of their past selves be trampled to death like this.

They had to stop it. *This time*, they had to stop it.

The cinnabar massacre continued. The Pyrope nobles cheered happily, avidly, intoxicated with excitement. Like boys running across the calm fields of spring. They had to, or else they wouldn't be able to endure. They had to win. That was their role. The first role that useless mixed-blood failures like them had ever been given, and their final chance to redeem themselves.

For as long as they could remember, they had been considered worthless. They were all failures. Despite the vast effort put into their births, consisting of several generations' worth of selective breeding, they were still half-breeds.

They were loathed and abused for rendering all those efforts fruitless. Their lot in life was to live under the Imperial nobility and their adherence to blood purity. To live under those who looked down on them and mocked them or their mixed blood. They called them worthless. Parasites. Human mongrels who were worth even less than hounds.

They had no dignity, no affection, and no future ahead of them. As children of mixed blood, their families would never acknowledge them, and no one would offer any help or protection to failures of selective breeding. They were seen as disgraces who weren't to be shown in public and were forbidden from leaving their households, so as to never be exposed to the world.

All they had was that one half of Pyrope blood running through their veins and the reverie that they deserved that blood. That they were worthy heirs to the Pyrope warrior bloodline that once reigned over the continent. That they were daring, powerful, and noble warriors. The dream that their useless selves would someday be celebrated as heroes.

And then came the time when they were told they would be given the chance to make that happen. A final chance to show that they were proud Pyropes.

And that was the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment. The first and only chance they were given to validate their existence.

So they had to prove it. Prove that they were warriors worthy of the mantle of hero. They had to prove it to the world and, more importantly, to themselves.

They had to prove their reverie, their ideals, the thing that gave them purpose. They took pride in their warrior blood. Failing to become heroes would be a betrayal to that identity. They couldn't afford to have that happen.

So they had to emerge victorious. And a simple triumph would not be enough. They had to win in such an overwhelming, impressive fashion that the whole world would have no choice but to take notice.

And so the knights raised their voices in chaotic laughter as they raced across the battlefield in search of prey.

Svenja sat in the midst of this gruesome battlefield, forbidden from pulling the trigger of the armored weapon she was in and, at the same time, unable to rejoice from the elation of battle. To her, it only seemed appalling. She sat pale and trembling, but unable to tear her eyes away. As a *daughter* to Archduchess Brantolote, she wasn't allowed to turn from the battle.

“Princess! Are you seeing this, Princess?! How does our battle look to you?!”

“O-of course I am!” She nodded with tears in her eyes. “That first thrust of the javelin in that moat, yes? Tilda, Siegfried!”

She called out the name of the vice commander and her pilot as they cheered proudly. She watched as the fifty-tonne Vánagandr ruthlessly crushed a Lyano-Shu, easily rupturing its cockpit block. She saw the red ooze from the wreckage.

“Ambrose, Oscar, you’ve done well to slay them one after another. That makes for eight enemy commanders, yes? And you’re wonderful, too, Ludwig, Leonhart...”

“Princess, that’s enough.”

Seeing her brave attempts to praise her knights despite holding back tears and nausea, Gilwiese spoke up.

“Even if you don’t say anything, your heart is with them... You don’t have to force yourself to do more.”

“B-but, Brother, that’s the role ‘Father’ entrusted me with.”

He found himself clicking his tongue roughly.

“Why must you be so obsessed with your role...? It’s nothing more than a slave’s collar. They forced this wish to become heroes onto us, making it seem like it was something we wanted all along.”

The knights and heroes sung of in epic poems, holding up lofty ideals of nobility and justice. Ideals that had no place in the real world. They were raised to wish for that and nothing else... And indeed, it had become their sole aspiration.

A terrible silence descended upon the two of them, like the frightful moment before glass shattered. Gilwiese turned around in a start, gazing at Svenja with wide eyes. Her lovely features were bereft of expression, and the voice leaving her lips was like that of an old woman.

“...Why must you say that?”

Her golden eyes were blank, only capable of reflecting light, like mirrors displaying a full moon that wasn't there.

"'Father' has spoken. And besides, this is our one and only role. If we can't do this, we truly will be left with nothing else. It is such a crucial, important, and lofty role!"

"...Svenja."

"The same should hold true for you, too, Brother! It should! All of us, every single one of us, must complete this role! That's all we have. Me, you, everyone else—there's nothing else to our names. Why must you say that we need to stop?!"

"Because—"

"Don't take this away from me! And don't discard your own role, Brother! Because to do that would be to abandon us. The only things that we have are this role and each other. That's the reason we're always together, isn't it? You feel that way, too, don't you, Brother? That's all we are. Stray dogs with nothing to our names but the comrades who share our scars and live in the same kennels!"

"..."

Hearing her cries made him clench his teeth.

No, Svenja, she...she doesn't have the power to oppose it anymore, either. It's been beaten into her, into us, since we've been too small and young. We don't have the strength anymore.

It was as she said. The only road available to them was the one in which they fulfilled their given roles. The Myrmecoleo Free Regiment was to be nothing more than a pawn in Archduchess Brantolote's grab for power. And if they didn't prove useful, they would once again be forced to live as useless strays.

So to keep Svenja and his comrades from being forced back into the pigsty, he would have to help them become a sword that would bring further glory to their family.

...You horrible vixen.

"In the end, our only path...is to let this curse bind us and spur us forward."

"Umm, Major Günter..."

Kurena parted her lips timidly. The ones in charge of moving this gigantic, hastily built gun weren't in a state of mind to listen to any transmissions not directed at them, but Kurena, the gunner, had little to do at the moment.

"I can hear her. The Mascot girl...Svenja, right? She left the radio on."

Svenja had communicated a few times with Frederica and the Trauerschwan's control team over the radio and had seemingly kept

the radio's settings on that frequency, having switched it on by mistake.

Kurena could hear that Gilwiese was at a loss for words. He hurriedly turned off the transmission and reconnected a moment later.

"Second Lieutenant Kukumila, I'm sorry, but could you please forget everything you just heard? If the others found out that I had a spat with the Princess in spite of my age or that I acted so weakly, it would reflect poorly upon me."

"Yeah, I won't tell anyone else...," she said in an attempt to play it off, nodding as if to signal that this was inconsequential. "But..."

"But?"

"It's just, hmm, I'm sorry."

Gilwiese seemed taken aback.

"...What are you apologizing for, exactly?"

"If I was your subordinate and I heard you say that, I would apologize. And...there's someone else I have to apologize to for that exact same reason."

"..."

"I don't want them to leave me. But I don't want to shackle them to me, either. I don't want to curse them like that. But...I'm pretty sure I acted the same way Svenja just did."

It was as if Svenja had cast some kind of curse to bind Gilwiese to her, the same as how the Myrmecoleo's soldiers had cursed Svenja so that she would remain bound to them. They were comrades, brethren carrying the same scars, so those scars had to have been their bond. A curse in the form of pride, of their common scars.

It's just like...

Kurena told Shin he didn't need to change, but in truth, all she did was beg him to stay the same. The Eighty-Six took pride in fighting to the end. But somewhere along the way, they had forgotten that this pride wasn't the *only* thing to live for—that they had more to live for.

For the first time, she realized that she was bound in place by the curse known as pride. And not just that; at some point, she began trying to bind others with that curse. She would bind her comrades, and she would bind Shin, so they wouldn't leave her behind in their pursuit of personal happiness.

"So I'm sorry... I'm sorry I tried to bind your feet so that you couldn't walk away. And, Svenja?"

Kurena got no response, but assuming she was being heard, she continued, "I know it's hard, but don't use your scars to hold your big brother hostage... Please."

Don't hold on to him so tightly that he can't escape... Even if it seems like he might try to leave you. Because that's not what he's trying to do.

Though she did feel a bit cowardly for doing so, she turned off the

RAID Device before she got a response. Even as they spoke, Shin was fighting, and children were dying. She didn't have the leisure of speaking to Gilwiese at a time like this. So she took one long breath.

Don't change. Don't leave me behind. *Yeah, I did wish for that.*

She was aware of the dark desire brewing in the back of her mind. It would probably never disappear. But...

I want to show you the sea.

He had found a wish for himself. And she was happy for him. Some part of her truly, honestly wanted to see it happen. Raising her head, she gritted her teeth, withstanding the sudden, fearful dizzy spell washing over her.

Moving forward still scared her. She had been afraid of moving on ever since her childhood. Because beyond that next step, the gun muzzle that took her parents and sister could be waiting for her, too. That moment when human malice would resurface could be lurking past that next step, ready to take everything from her again. And it could very well be that, once again, she would be denied, hurt, and powerless to do anything about it.

But even so.

“Let's move forward.”

That voice traveled across the ashen battlefield through the Sensory Resonance. It was a voice thick with determination, even if there was a hint of fear in it. Michihi mouthed that person's name in a daze. With a hint of disbelief. It was hard to believe this was the same girl who'd been so sunken and dejected after the last operation.

“Kurena.”

“Let's move forward. We have to save Shin. We need to defeat Shana. And the Lyano-Shu... We have to save them, too.”

She thought she had regained her composure, but her voice still trembled. She was still scared. The fear was paralyzing. Making such an important decision was frightening. Everyone's life was on the line, after all. What if she made a mistake? What if Shin and the airborne battalion, and Lena and Rito and Michihi, and the rest of the brigade's main force—what if they all got killed because of her words?

That thought scared her to no end.

But still...

“If that saint or whatever talks to them, it should stop those kids, right? Then let's get the 2nd Army Corps's saint to come over. We'll get to the Trauerschwan's firing position, pick Shin up after they defeat *Shana*, and regroup with the 2nd Army Corps to lift the

electronic interference. If we do that, the battle with those kids will end... We can stop this."

We can end the bloody massacre of kids who are just like us.

"We...we can't afford to kill ourselves anymore. We have to stop everything. Both this battle, and the stupid war holding us in place!"

Hearing her shout, someone whispered. It wasn't so much an answer to her as it was a whisper they directed at themselves, as if to reconfirm something.

"...That's right. Let's go."

Someone else then followed. Or maybe, it was everyone else.

"Let's go."

For their friends. For their comrades, as distant as they may be. For the Teshat, who couldn't leave. And most importantly—for their own sakes. They might not have been able to save their own younger selves, but they could save the children right in front of them now.

If they could lend them a hand, meager though the assistance might be, even when no one was there to save them when they were little...then that would be salvation for themselves, too.

"Let's go."

To save our comrades. To save who we were in the past.

"Let's go!"

At the sound of the Eighty-Six's cries and cheers, Lena pursed her lips.

Let's go.

In that case, it was her role to open the way forward.

"Major Günter. We're heading for the Trauerschwan's firing position. Help us break the blockade. I want you to widen the gap in your three o'clock direction, where the 3rd Army Corps's 8th Division and the ambush regiment connect."

If they were to resume their march, battle with the Teshat of the 3rd Army Corps's units and the child soldiers was inevitable. Lena couldn't condone the murder of children, and so it pained her to thrust the burden of their battle onto Gilwiese and the Myrmecoleo Regiment. But if the Eighty-Six felt that was a line they couldn't cross, Lena would respect that.

She couldn't place the lives of foreign child soldiers over those of a fellow Federacy unit, as well as her own subordinates—and comrades.

Gilwiese smiled bitterly, of course.

"So you're politely asking us to do your dirty work, Bloody Reina?"

"Yes," Lena said unflinchingly. "I recognize this, and my order remains, Major. As the Queen serving under them."

Burden yourself with this sin, so the Eighty-Six will not have to. Carve it into your flesh, your very soul, so the Eighty-Six's hearts will remain whole. I shall bear the cruelty of having to weigh the lives of my comrades against the lives of others. I won't let the Eighty-Six make that choice, nor be tormented by it.

Because I am the Eighty-Six's Queen—and their comrade in arms.

Gilwiese deepened his sarcastic smirk.

“That’s a problem, Colonel Milizé. It was I who said we’d do this to begin with. If you’re the Eighty-Six’s Queen, then I’m the older brother who leads the Myrmecoleo Regiment. Letting an outsider like you take the blame for my younger siblings would hurt our dignity... It would be quite the problem if we let you take the fall for this massacre just because you happened to order us to do it.”

“...”

“We accept, Silver Queen. Everyone, we have our orders, and so we go. Myrmecoleo, all units!”

“I’m counting on you, Captain of the Cinnabar Knights. All Strike Package units!”

They both gave their orders. The Captain of the Cinnabar Knights to his order of antlions, and the Silver Queen to her army of skeletons graced with a Valkyrie’s name.

“Carve these Valkyries a path through the clouds!”

“Resume your march at full speed and deliver the Trauerschwan to its firing position!”

It seemed the main force had broken through the 3rd Army Corps’s blockade and resumed its march. Shin noticed it from the Legion’s movements, even as far as he was from the Theocracy’s front lines, fighting against the Halcyon.

The Legion’s frontline forces broke off from their battle with the 3rd Army Corps’s divisions and made their way for the city ruins they were fighting in.

“Lena, there’s a Legion unit massing from the main force’s forward path.”

The Legion unit was smaller than predicted. Since the 3rd Army Corps had stopped their march, he’d assumed the Legion would send a considerably larger group to intercept the Strike Package’s main force. Perhaps, the 2nd Army Corps had sent a force that held the Legion in check, or maybe, the Legion’s battle with the 3rd Army Corps was still ongoing. Either way...

“And I think they won’t be able to avoid fighting three of them. Have the main force prepare for battle.”

Shin detected the Legion's position with his ability, and based on that, Lena calculated the route that would result in them running into as few Legion units as possible. But even so, the Reginleif line protecting the Trauerschwan fell apart rather quickly.

They were fighting in the Legion's territories, and even if there were fewer enemies than expected, the metallic-gray formation was still as large and menacing as the name of *Legion* would imply. Prioritizing maintaining the Trauerschwan's speed, each Reginleif squadron broke off from the team to distract the Legion forces as they raced across the ashen battlefield.

They fought with greater fervor than before. Just a short while ago, many of the Eighty-Six had lost the courage or strength to move on, and the rest felt reservations toward those who did.

But now they had found their way. They had found their courage.

The inertial navigation system brought up an alert, informing all that the Trauerschwan had reached its firing position. At that very moment, Michihi's Hualien crumpled, its front legs both giving way. It was battered and damaged all over. There weren't any remaining Reginleifs around the unharmed Trauerschwan to make for a battalion. Everyone else was off, stalling for time or keeping the enemy in check. Based on how many were still connected to the Resonance, there hadn't been too many casualties, but this was a battle deep within Legion territory. They wouldn't last long.

"...That's why we have to...stop this here..."

These battles. The fight against the Halcyon, and this pointless skirmish with the Theocracy's 3rd Army Corps. Seeing children die before her, being reminded of the pain of seeing her family, friends, and comrades perish—it all made her feel so powerless. She hated it. It felt like it put her scars on display for the world to see. As if to say everyone and anyone could be hurt, and that was only natural. It was disgraceful and terrible.

Still breathing heavily, Michihi sharply exhaled once and took another breath, shouting out.

"Kurena, we're counting on you!"

A thought idly crossed Michihi's mind. If this war—this operation—could end, she wanted to visit her ancestors' homeland someday. Of course, she didn't have any relatives or acquaintances there. She didn't know the place well enough to miss it.

But this was still her wish. One that she found and decided on for herself.

Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, they had no future, and so at the very least, they had to decide the way they'd live and the way they'd die for themselves. This was the same. She'd decided a wish for herself. Her own future, chosen by her hands.

By now, wishing for death at the end of her battles was something she could no longer do. Perhaps, even the name of the Eighty-Six would lose its meaning once all this fighting had come to an end.

But even so. Even if their pride, their sacrifices, and the scars they carried would be rendered meaningless... She didn't want to become a pathetic person who couldn't decide their own way to live. Their own wishes, or futures.

“Let's end this battle!”

The Halcyon's five railguns suddenly disregarded the airborne battalion and turned in an unexpected direction. The heavy turrets rotated, screeching loudly and raining sparks as they turned south. It was aiming in the direction of the Trauerschwan—it had detected its approach.

The Trauerschwan was massive, as large as the Morpho, and it was a prototype. It couldn't possibly take evasive action. The Reginleifs began bombarding the Halcyon at once, intending to scatter its liquid metal and disrupt its firing.

It was a weapon that humanity introduced to the battlefield only after biding its time. A new weapon unregistered in the Legion's database. But the railguns immediately recognized it as a more urgent threat than the Reginleifs and moved in to shoot it down. However, the high explosives repeatedly bombarding it decimated their electrodes, forcing the Halcyon to fall back.

Silver liquid was blown away by the explosions, shining in the flames as it danced through the air like blood splatter.

But the Reginleifs were running low on ammo. If the Trauerschwan were to be destroyed, there would be no way of ending this battle. And so the airborne battalion fired at it for dear life. Everyone kept their breaths held, thinking they might have made it. But as if seeing through that momentary pause, one railgun reared its head.

Johanna. The railgun that originally contained Shana. The Liquid Micromachines that splashed from all five turrets gathered between its rails. Using every bit of this liquid to regenerate a single railgun would be faster than each drop returning to its respective railgun and repairing the missing parts from within.

The Halcyon's choice was correct. Using the one moment when the bombardment died down, Johanna had completed its preparations to fire again. Tendrils of electrical current danced with an earsplitting shriek as they ran over the spear-like barrel.

“I ain't letting you!”

The next moment, Cyclops sprung in front of the barrel. She preferred to destroy the railgun that originally housed Shana again rather than let the Trauerschwan take it out. She climbed her way up, once again aiming at the tear in the turret.

She'd been entrusted with handling Johanna. She said she'd do it.

So *this time*, she kept her promise.

And so Shiden appeared in Johanna's sights. Triggering and purging her pile drivers to kick herself up, she changed her posture in midair, fixing the sights of Cyclops's main gun into the gaping depths of the 800 mm barrel.

So 800 mm caliber—a long distance cannon, eh? Sniping never was your forte.

You're one to talk. You used a buckshot cannon, too. You weren't a sniper, either.

She thought she could hear a chilly voice reply.

I've always hated you, since the first day we met.

It was Shana's icy tone. The first thing she said when they met. They always bickered at the time. Even after everyone but them died in the first ward they were assigned to in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, they kept on arguing.

Next time, I'll bury your body.

When that happens, I'll dig your grave.

At the time, she didn't like Shana much. Shana hated her, too. That was why they always butted heads. No matter what happened, they always competed.

But if one of them was to die, the other would dig her grave. That was the one thing they would do for each other, no matter what.

"The only one who gets to put you to rest...is me."

Trigger.

Cyclops's 88 mm gun turret roared a moment faster than Johanna could. The shot that it fired hit the electrode rampaging through the rails at that very moment, causing the circuits to go haywire.

Johanna's turret, its thirty-meter-long barrel—and Cyclops, which was right in front of it—were all blown away in the 800 mm railgun's fierce explosion.

"...You idiot."

Shin saw it happen. Upon receiving word of the Trauerschwan's approach, Shin had moved in to once again overheat the Halcyon. And he saw it happen. Shiden's Para-RAID...turned off. Cyclops's blip had vanished from the data link.

But they didn't have the time to spend confirming her survival. The four remaining railguns could fire again if they were provided

more Liquid Micromachines. And that would make Shiden's sacrifice meaningless.

Using his high-frequency blades to tear through the Halcyon, he increased the aperture they'd carved into it. He didn't know how long it would take for it to reactivate the railguns. The three surface-suppression units, Undertaker, Anna Maria, and the six units in their platoons all fired into the Halcyon at once.

A rain of fire, anti-light-armor missiles, and HEAT shells filled the belly of the beast. The steel behemoth once again fell to its knees.

"Kurena!"

Let's finish this fight!

"Yeah, I know." Kurena nodded briefly. "Michihi, everyone."

From here on out, it was her time to shine.

"Trauerschwan, deploying to firing position!"

The thuds of several heavy locks being undone reached her ears as two plow-shaped recoil absorbers deployed on both sides of the turret like the wings of a bird. The massive frame dug into the ground, fixing itself in position and kicking up the dust around it in a large cloud. Spreading its four massive wings, it assumed the position of a waterfowl extending its neck.

A head-mount display automatically lowered in front of her. It was meant for accurate aiming and connected to the Trauerschwan's fire-control system. The long, thin barrel—the water fowl's proverbial neck—quivered as its angle of firing was carefully adjusted.

Kurena was used to the Reginleif's immediate responsiveness, and so the rails' horizontal and then vertical alignment felt terribly sluggish. Cooling system online. Capacitor connected. Chief and vice-chief circuits both operating normally.

<<Warning. Radar exposure from an unregistered heat signature detected fifteen kilometers, NNW.>>

"I know that," she whispered hoarsely.

The Halcyon was a railgun-equipped Legion unit. In other words, the Morpho's successor. Of course it had a radar system for self-defense—

<<Warning lifted. Radar waves terminated.>>

"—Kurena!"

As soon as she turned her attention to the warning, a voice called out to her. And she knew who it was immediately. She would never mistake his for anyone else's.

Shin.

"The Halcyon's railguns are all silenced, and we overheated it again, so it can't move! The estimated time until it reactivates is one hundred seventy seconds... Sorry, but I'm counting on you to

handle the rest.”

“Roger that—you can count on me.” She nodded, a hint of bashfulness to her voice.

One hundred seventy seconds. The Trauerschwan’s reload time was two hundred seconds, meaning she didn’t have time to fire a second shot. But that was fine. One shot was all she needed. By now, things like the question of what would happen if she failed, or the anxiety of realizing that she couldn’t afford to screw up this time—none of that was on her mind.

The airborne battalion had been forced into a longer battle than expected. But even so, they desperately put their lives on the line to buy her those hundred seventy seconds. With the 3rd Army Corps’s betrayal, the Expedition Brigade was the only remaining obstacle that stood in her way of defeating the Legion. But despite all those unexpected developments, her comrades still cleared a way for her to get to her planned position.

Everyone put their lives on the line to help Kurena get here—so now the only thing that was left was for her to gun the enemy down.

That was all.

Roger—you can count on me.

She realized, with a smile, that she’d said those same words to Shin countless times in the past. On the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s battlefield, she’d given that reply regularly. Countless times, he’d depended on her, relied on her, and she had lived up to his expectations.

She’d shot down Legion commander units. Observer Units. The remains of their comrades, who’d been forced into becoming mechanical ghosts.

In which case, at least on the battlefield, she’d been saving him the whole time, since back then. Or maybe she’d already been doing it from the very beginning, when she opened her heart to him and thanked him for taking on the pain of being their Reaper.

An electronic *beep* blared out. The fire-control system informed her that the projected trajectory of her shot was locked onto the target. But not yet. It was still slightly off.

Everything had been taken from her by this war. And that was why she couldn’t afford to lose anything else.

She realigned her sights and then whispered, as if praying.

“Let’s end this. Let’s end this war with our own two hands.”

She squeezed the trigger.

The Trauerschwan—the first railgun that humanity had ever introduced to the battlefield—roared. An absurd amount of electrical

energy, capable of powering an entire city, propelled a shell that flew across the earth, aiming to shoot down the mechanical Goliath.

An arc discharge whited out the ashen land like a flash of lightning. The Trauerschwan's furled wings and gigantic metallic frame reflected the light away, turning black. For a second, it became pure ebony—worthy of its name as the Black Swan of Death.

A deafening sound, like the shattering of countless panes of glass, tore across the sky.

Due to its frictional heat against the shell, which was propelled to a velocity of 2,300 meters per second in the space of a split second, the rails of the Trauerschwan began to fuse and melt, and the recoil of the shot broke them to bits. Countermass billowed from behind the Trauerschwan to offset the recoil, but the countermass failed to properly curb the mass and scattered to the ashen ground with the fragments of the rails.

It tore through the ashen sky, like the colorful flowers of flame she'd once seen in the battlefield's night sky. The scattering fragments caught the rays of sunshine, reflecting a rainbow of prismatic light.

And before the final fragment could flutter to the ground, the thunderbolt arrow had gouged into the steel behemoth's massive form in the distance.

"Impact confirmed," Frederica said. **"And a direct hit, at that. Impressive work...Kurena."**

"Yeah."

The Halcyon lurched. Cracks ran across it, stemming from the gigantic hole that had been punched straight through it. Unable to support its own weight, it began to lose structural integrity. It was like seeing a large sculpture crumble away, having lost its dry bonds. It broke apart with the majesty of a mythical monster, and with the swiftness of having been struck down by the fury of a God.

As she watched it through the screen deployed over her optics, a thought crossed her mind. The truth was that it had been like this all along, but she hadn't realized it until just now.

When she was a child sent to the internment camps, when her parents and sister died, she couldn't fight back. She was too young, too powerless, and she was too weak to put up any resistance. Any absurdity that may have befallen her was one she was helpless to do anything about.

But things were different now.

Years had passed. She'd grown older, and she wasn't a powerless child any longer. She had the strength, the means, and, most importantly, the will to fight back. To fight off the Legion and the

despair they brought. Against any absurdity that may have tried to befall her.

If she wanted to end this massacre, she could end it.

If she wished to safeguard the future that *he* wanted—the future *she* wanted—she could defend them from any malice humanity might direct toward them.

People, and the world, were cruel and callous. Malicious and unreasonable. But even so, she would oppose them, come what may. She would protect even the future ahead of them.

You sat idly by and watched your parents get murdered.

Yeah. And it's been tormenting me ever since. I've been...scared ever since.

But now I can protect them. Dad, and Mom, and my sister...and the me of the past.

The electromagnetic interference that had sealed off the battlefield was lifted. The Lyano-Shu that were equipped with jamming equipment were either destroyed or incapacitated. And without waiting an extra minute, the Federacy's side began jamming the frequency that Hilnå used to send commands to the 3rd Army Corps.

Before long, the voice of another saint filled the battlefield, riding along the now-clear airwaves.

"I invoke the earth goddess's true name of ' '! All ye godless spears of the
3rd Army Corps, cease your liturgies!"

These words were instilled into all Teshat psyches during training, so as to prevent them from rebelling, and would force them to halt any combat regardless of their will. This was a safety measure that had never been used before, but at the very end, it had filled its role.

Following that, the commander of the two Federacy units spoke, delivering a message that would not have possibly reached the Strike Package had the 3rd Army Corps decided to reject the first holy general's orders.

"Vanadis to all Strike Package units. Once the airborne battalion is safely retrieved, retreat back into Theocracy territories."

"Mock Turtle to all Myrmecoleo Regiment units. Cease all hostilities with the 3rd Army Corps and assist with the retrieval of the airborne battalion. Cooperate with the 2nd Army Corps to eliminate the Legion, and—"

The tenor of Gilwiese's voice contrasted with the silver chime of Lena's. Hilnå was overcome with such despair that it made her sink to the floor.

O earth. Ye headless, winged goddess.

"Why have you abandoned me...?"

It was then that a communication from Lena reached her.

"Hilnå. You've lost... Please take this chance and surrender yourself."

Hilnå couldn't help but scoff scornfully at the clear, genuine concern in her voice. Just how compassionate could someone who professed herself to be the Bloodstained Queen pretend to be?

"Is that mercy, Queen? After I turned my sword on you and your knights?"

"No." Lena's tone was quiet and soft, but harsh nonetheless. "All I want is for you to not burden the Eighty-Six with the weight of your wish and the shadow of your death. They are not heroes. They're children who've been scarred by this war... Who've their hands full just keeping themselves alive... Just like you."

That's true. I knew that. Yet still, I wanted us to go down together. I didn't want redemption for either of us. If we could manage that, I...and the Teshat would prove that we couldn't save ourselves. Our carelessness wasn't our fault...

After pausing for a moment, Lena parted her lips again.

"I noticed a 3rd Army Corps division that was charged with keeping the Legion at bay while the Expedition Brigade's main force was marching to the firing position. They stuck to their former duty, fighting the Legion off."

"...? What do you me—?"

"They kept doing that even after your plot was exposed, Hilnå. Your subordinates kept most of the Legion forces at bay. And they probably did it to stop the Legion from getting in the main force's way. So there wouldn't be any more Eighty-Six casualties, and so the weight of your sin wouldn't increase."

"...?!" Hilnå widened her eyes at those unexpected words.

"You didn't want to have anything else taken from you, right? Your soldiers love you so much, Hilnå. Don't hate yourself when they care this much about you. Don't deprive your soldiers, who hold you so dear, by letting yourself die. Let them feel rewarded in the fact that they managed to protect you."

The transmission cut off. And as if that was their signal, some men in pearl-gray uniforms—soldiers who weren't her subordinates—stormed into the command center. Their armbands bore the symbol of a bird of prey. The 2nd Army Corps's Teshat. They all carried assault rifles, which they began to turn on her.

But before they could, Hilnå let go of her command baton and kneeled slowly.

Why have you abandoned me, earth goddess? Why have you abandoned my subordinates, my homeland? No matter...

"I cannot abandon my subordinates."

They...they alone did not abandon me. Even when everyone and everything else did, when the rest of the world did turn its back on me, they remained.

"You're a hard one to kill, you know that, Shiden? Anyone else would've died doing what you did."

“That’s the first thing ya tell me? I’d rather not hear it from the guy who survived the Special—zero percent survival rate—Reconnaissance mission.”

Shiden’s tongue was as sharp as ever, despite the fact that she was covered in blood. She was still standing on her own two feet, though, so for a wounded person, she was relatively sprightly.

It’d taken a few people to pry Cyclops’s warped canopy open, but once they did, she stepped out no worse for the wear. Shin peered in, looking down on Shiden with his eyes narrowed. She did have the devil’s luck when it came to walking away from deadly situations. He almost felt irritated with himself for losing his composure when it seemed that Cyclops had been blown up alongside *Shana*. Not that he would ever voice how worried he was about her.

“So, Li’l Reaper, how goes the battle?”

“It’s over. We’re waiting for our retrieval unit.”

With the Halcyon destroyed, the Legion units that had previously been rushing over to the city ruins to offer assistance seemed to have decided to retreat into their territories. Any Legion units that were still left in the retrieval unit’s way were being mopped up by the Myrmecoleo Regiment and the 2nd Army Corps. They had also finished sweeping up any self-propelled mines left in the city ruins, and there were no more enemy units around Shin and the airborne battalion.

Shiden nodded, mouthing an *oh yeah?*, and stretched. Of course, since she was battered and bruised all over, she began yelping in pain halfway through and let out an energetic howl as she recovered from her awkward posture.

“Aaah, dammit! I’m never pullin’ that kind of stunt again!”

“Please don’t. I’ve gotten enough complaints about you from Bernholdt to last me a lifetime.”

She’d ended up going pretty crazy, after all. Shin then threw a fleeting glance in her direction.

“...You okay?”

She’d been forced to gun down someone who was dear enough to her that she had lost all sense of composure and inhibition. She gazed back into his earnest eyes.

“Are *you* okay, Li’l Reaper? Since when have you ever worried about me?”

“...Forget I said anything.”

Annoyed, Shin climbed down from Cyclops’s wreckage. Seeing him turn his back in blatant discomfort, Shiden called out after him.

“How do I put it? It was pleasant in its own way, I guess,”

Shin stopped, without turning back to look at her.

“*The battlefield*. There, I had a place I belonged, more or less. So I

figured maybe I could just spend the rest of my life there. Be it the Eighty-Sixth Sector or the Federacy.”

The battlefield. The place they were determined to stay in, no matter what. They had come to embrace and even latch on to the deadly Eighty-Sixth Sector, the source of so much pain.

“...”

“But y’know? As long as we stay on the battlefield...this is gonna keep happening. Any one of our friends could end up dead.”

I’d rather not lose any more friends the way I lost Shana.

“I never wanna have to do anything like that again. I’m over this fucking war.”

And that’s why...

He turned his bloodred eyes to look at her, and she met them, cracking a jovial, relieved smile.

“Let’s end this damn war already... We’ve got our whole lives ahead of us, right?”

Gilwiese was part of the airborne battalion’s retrieval unit. Some of it was because he wanted to see the Eighty-Six’s soldiers all returned to safety, of course, but more importantly, he had a goal to achieve.

The city ruins had been reduced to large stretches of empty land, which silently spoke of the intense fighting that took place there. It was as if a giant had rammed its fists into the ground nonstop. There, they regrouped with Shin and the airborne battalion.

Gilwiese waited until after his vice captain and the Vánagandr under his command had been retrieved. Only once that was completed did he go to keep guard over the area, piloting his unit to the ruins’ northern tip.

The northern part of the Theocracy—the deepest point of the blank sector within the Legion territories. The farthest place a human body could exist without protective clothing. Svenja’s Esper ability was a far cry from *the original’s*, so her range was much smaller. If he didn’t bring her all the way here, she wouldn’t be able to detect it.

“I found it, Brother Gilwiese.”

Svenja’s golden eyes glowed as she gazed far, far into the north. Her Esper ability was the sole thing the selective breeding was able to reproduce, even if only partially. She was one of the few Heliodor oracles remaining in the Federacy and the Theocracy, capable of locating distant threats.

“It’s become quite faint, but there are traces of the *color* the Theocracy’s Espers left behind when they detected it. The threat their oracles found was not the Halcyon, after all.”

“...So it really isn’t. The Federacy’s staff officers definitely know

how to do their jobs.”

The Halcyon’s actions and movements were, honestly speaking, quite unnatural. Even if it did notice the fact that the Theocracy’s recon had discovered it, that didn’t mean it had to go ahead and attack them. It came closer, as if showing itself off. As if beckoning them to open hostilities with it.

While it was there, the Theocracy’s attention had to remain focused on it. After all, the Legion’s territories were permanently blocked off by the Eintagsfliege, and the blank sector and its ashen menace rejected the entry of any and all life.

But they set it there to prevent humanity from drawing its attention to that area. The Halcyon was an imposing decoy meant to avert one’s gaze from the *true* threat lurking deep within the territories.

“We should share this with the Strike Package. Maybe they found something on their side.”

Zashya’s role within the airborne battalion was to act as a communication relay and offer advanced information analysis. And also...

“...You’ve done well, Sirins. Initiate self-destruct sequence.”

The Sirins had been deployed since the previous day. Not within Alkonosts, but simply in their humanoid forms. She had them investigate the area a hundred kilometers into the Legion’s territories. And now Zashya gave her messenger birds this order. It was regrettable, but they couldn’t afford to let the Theocracy, or worse, the Legion, lay their hands on them.

Any optical information that the Sirins perceived was relayed and stored within Królik. They’d only viewed things from a distance, since they couldn’t afford to be discovered and caught, but it was enough to use for analysis.

Staring at the image in her sub-window, she whispered:

“Impressive, Prince Viktor. I found it. It’s as you’ve expected.”

Before her was the image of the scaffolding of a looming tower... built in the shape of a hexagonal prism.

It seemed that Hilnå didn’t send her people after the maintenance crew who’d stayed behind in the base. Perhaps, she simply didn’t have enough men to do it. There was a bit of a struggle, but the maintenance crew successfully managed to keep the Armée Furieuse catapult safe.

By the time they regrouped with Lena and the control crew, the

2nd Army Corps had arrived to guard them and they carefully allowed Vanadis inside. Just as they finally felt safe enough to relax a little, they received word that the retrieval unit had regrouped with the airborne battalion. Soon after, Lena's Para-RAID received a call from the airborne battalion's commander, and before he could even say anything, Lena spoke.

"Shin. Good work out there."

"Lena."

It was Shin's usual, serene tone. The battle with the Halcyon was quite severe, but thankfully, it seemed he wasn't seriously injured. Lena sighed with relief. A moment later—

"Lena, could you send Fido over? We have something we need to collect."

Really?

The first thing he told her, right out of the gate, was about Fido?

True, their retrieval work wasn't complete yet, meaning they were still effectively in the middle of the operation. In that regard, Shin's behavior was justifiable, but between that and all the other things that kept her tightly wound, Lena regarded his request sullenly.

After all, things were pretty difficult on her side, too. She'd worked herself ragged and had been quite worried about him.

Shin then snickered over the Resonance.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist... But I really do need you to send Fido over."

"Sheesh...!"

"We're fine on this end. Though I heard you had to pull some crazy stunts and escape the enemy's HQ."

His tone was clearly teasing. Lena pursed her lips.

"...Jerk."

"Well, I wasn't the one who went and said such distracting things right before an operation."

Apparently, their little spat from before the operation began had not yet concluded. Lena checked the clock on the optical screen, which showed that it had only been a few hours. But it felt like they had that silly argument days ago. She curled her lips up into a syrupy smile. And she said it again, this time in a more carefree fashion, her tone rich with happiness.

"You jerk."

Shin said nothing in reply, but she could feel him smile over the Resonance.

"And it might be a little too soon to say it, but...welcome back."

"Yeah... It's good to be back."

Perhaps noticing she was speaking to Shin, Fido wobbled over excitedly. Seeing it from the corner of her eye, Lena asked a question.

She wished they could keep talking a little longer, but she couldn't very well waste much more time on banter that was unrelated to the operation.

"So you said there was something you need to collect?"

"Right," Shin said with a hint of hesitance, looking up at the Halcyon.

The Spearhead squadron had moved away from it so as to not get caught up in the Trauerschwan's shot, and they regrouped around its wreckage after it had been eliminated. Through his ability to hear the voices of the Legion, he could still hear it was just barely functioning within the crumpled wreckage. His power allowed him to detect where the control core was.

"Some of them have been blown apart, but we need to collect the wreckage of the five railguns, and part of the Halcyon's control core."



To aid their return, the Theocracy prepared a special, extravagant train near the Theocracy's border, which would ferry them back home. This was their country's way of showing gratitude and good faith for having the Federacy's forces caught up in their scandal.

The area was far from the front lines. Here, the volcanic ash could scarcely reach the blue sky. The cars of the locomotive moved slowly along the autumn plains of this foreign country. A flowery wind, carrying with it the scent of the shrubbery native to the region, wafted in through the open window. Those flowers were small, golden blossoms, often used as tea leaves in the Theocracy.

It was a tea that Lena had gotten used to drinking over the past month. During briefings, or during her daily meals in the base...and during a gathering the Theocracy had held to formally apologize for Hilnå's incident.

The Teshat could perhaps not be seen as accountable, as they were only following orders. But Hilnå had rebelled against her country. Lena asked what would become of her after this...but the first holy general, Totoka, only said she would not be executed for it. The faith forbade bloodshed as an absolute evil, and it was the Theocracy that had forced the Teshat into military service. Even if she was a criminal, execution would be seen as murder and as a sin all the same. Because of this, the Theocracy didn't allow for capital punishment.

Her familial and clan ties will be severed, and she will be confined to her home. That much is certain.

When the saints who handled government affairs came to visit the

barracks that the Strike Package used during their expedition, she met the first holy general in the barracks' hall. This was the answer he gave when she asked him.

Much like Hilnå, he was far younger than his rank would imply. He looked to be about twenty, and he had his long golden hair tied in a braid. His eyes were also a golden shade.

Personally, I would prefer if she could be pardoned of her house arrest once the war ends... But I shouldn't be saying that in front of you. Not after she threatened your lives. However, you did refuse to kill her and the little ones. Should we not then abide by the earth goddess's will and spare her life?

What about the Teshat? Lena had asked.

They truly are innocent. A saint ordered them, and they were compelled to obey. That's all. They will be sent back to be reeducated once the army is properly reorganized... But the time may be right for us to reconsider these customs. Perhaps, the Legion are the earth goddess's way of showing us that we can no longer continue like this.

Lena had completely understood the general's feelings. He intended to fight the customs that had ruled over this land for centuries. Perhaps as a way of absolving Hilnå of her sins. She had her family stolen from her and the role of holy woman forced onto her by the war.

Still...while Lena did think this was the beginning of a change, the beginning of a step forward, she had been with the Eighty-Six this whole time. And some of them didn't agree with the idea of turning their backs on the battlefield and living their lives in a gilded cage of peace. So perhaps, the same would hold true for the Teshat.

Perhaps, it would hold true for Hilnå, who wept and begged for nothing more to be taken away from her—so much so that she would cast her own homeland into the flames for the cause.

"Boo."

"Eep!"

As she was gazing out the window, lost in the thoughts of things she had no power to change, she felt something cold touch the back of her neck. Lena turned around in surprise, only to find Kurena. She had two bottles of a carbonated drink in her hands and had apparently pressed the cold, dripping surface of one of them against Lena's skin.

It was a drink flavored with honey and citrus, unique to the Theocracy. Handing one of the bottles to Lena, she took the seat opposite hers.

"You thinking about the kids from the Theocracy military?" she asked her.

"Yes..." Lena sighed, wrapping her hands around the cold bottle.

Kurena shrugged at her casually.

“See, you shouldn’t have to shoulder everything like that. It’ll just tire you out.”

Feeling the pair of argent eyes on her, Kurena intentionally focused on opening her bottle. Kurena certainly felt bad for them, too, of course. Hilnå and the Teshat had been forced to fight and had their futures taken away from them. They were like mirror images of the Eighty-Six. But...

“It might sound cold coming from me, but there isn’t anything you or I can do for them anymore. They’re the only ones who can decide their fates.”

Back when the Eighty-Six were first taken in by the Federacy, they were pitied and told to enter a cage of peace. The Federacy said it was for the sake of their happiness... But the Eighty-Six hated it. Kurena still hated this idea. Freedom was entirely about choice, after all—and that included what made one happy and how one wanted to lead their life.

If that was what freedom was, she wanted to choose for herself.

And if those children wouldn’t be allowed to choose their own fates themselves...they’d probably never be able to escape the memories of the countless things that had been taken from them.

“Besides, didn’t you say it yourself, Lena? You can’t focus on kids from another country. You’ve got someone you need to prioritize right next to you. So you better treat him like your number one, you got that?”

“Hmm... Do you mean...?”

It went without saying, of course.

Lena’s face flushed red, and her silver eyes darted around for a moment in a panic. Kurena wouldn’t overlook that, though. She glared at her menacingly with her large, golden eyes. She had the right to ask this question. She absolutely, definitely did.

“Did you...give him your answer?”

“I...I did...,” Lena replied, her face beet red and her voice almost inaudibly thin.

Her reaction made it clear she wasn’t lying. Incidentally, some other girls—Anju, Shiden, Michihi, Mika, and Zashya—were sitting nearby and turned to look at their exchange while pretending to be casual. Lena realized this, of course. Hence her bashfulness.

But either way, Kurena nodded. Good. Because if she didn’t give him an answer...Kurena would be hard-pressed to do what came next.

“Then the first thing you have to do when we get back home is invite Shin out on a date. It’s your first date as his girlfriend. You need to make it one to remember.”

Not that she really knew a whole lot about what boyfriends and girlfriends did, but apparently, that was the way of things.

Anju leaned in next. She placed both elbows on the backrest of the seat behind Lena and peered down.

"In that case...Lena, Lieutenant Esther gave us a farewell present before we left the Fleet Countries. It's a unique perfume native to that region, made using something called ambergris. Apparently, they collect it from the leviathans? I got a little bit, but it smells really nice. She told us to hand it to you if you give Shin a clear answer."

"...Why does Lieutenant Esther know about this, too...?!"

The answer was that Lena had been so busy running away from Shin that everyone felt too bad for him. So Marcel consulted Lieutenant Esther, Anju complained, and Rito accidentally let it slip. As such, Ishmael and a few of the other officers there heard or were consulted about it. Ishmael helped participate in getting the ambergris perfume for them.

But that aside, Anju grinned at her.

"Apparently, it's some pheromone the leviathans give off during their mating season. So the Open Sea clans' tradition is to put it on during courtship or on the night of a wedding."

"Anju?!"

"Also, apparently, the king of the United Kingdom from three generations ago spread it around the room on their first night. It invoked the deep blue of the ocean floor and had the dignity of a dragon or something. Anyway, they say it's a very distinguished, pleasant smell."

"Huh, so it doesn't actually get you in the mood? Boring," Shiden said curtly.

"If you want something more romantic, how about a gardenia or jasmine perfume?" Michihi chimed in. "My clan's family had a custom of applying it by spraying it in the air during the first night. It uses all these flowers that have this sweet, sexy aroma with an aphrodisiac effect!"

And as she laughed and smiled at this boisterous exchange, Kurena silently slipped away.

A few of the train's compartments were occupied by the Myrmecoleo Regiment, with the rest being allotted to the Strike Package. One way or another, their compartments ended up being separated into ones for men and women.

Kurena opened the horizontal door leading to the adjacent compartment for the boys. She'd checked where he was ahead of time. The windows here were open, too, and so the faint aroma of flowers

wafted in. Inside a four-person box seat, she found Shin dozing off, leaning against the backrest of his seat.

He'd been injured during the previous operation and was sent to command this airborne operation as soon as he'd recovered from his wounds. And this mission ran him pretty ragged in its own way. He was probably exhausted. The book he was in the middle of reading sat open on his hands, and he looked so defenseless that the absence of the black cat sitting on his lap felt almost unnatural.

She threw a gaze at Raiden, who was occupying the opposite seat and simply cocked an eyebrow in a teasing manner as he rose to stand. He left the compartment, tapping Rito and a few of the other Claymore squadron boys who peered inside curiously, and led them out along with him. He then nodded at a few of the other Spearhead squadron members sitting nearby, like Claude, Tohru, and Dustin, and gestured for them to get up, too.

Before long, it was just she and Shin in the compartment.

You didn't have to do that.

She was only here so she could put her own feelings at ease. Shin himself didn't need to hear it. She'd simply say her piece and be done with it. He could sleep through it for all she cared. He was tired, after all, so not waking him up would be better.

But then she shook her head. Her timidness was rearing its head even at this juncture, whispering those seductive words into her ears. But no. That wouldn't be right. She had to put her feelings to rest. To face them head-on and settle everything. Running away would defeat the purpose.

"Shin," she called out to him softly. "Shin, um... Do you have a minute?"

"...Mm." A voice escaped his lips as she shook him a little.

He opened his eyelids and blinked a couple of times before looking up at Kurena.

His bloodred eyes. The sole color Kurena thought was the most beautiful one in the world. And before he could ask her *What is it?*, Kurena beat him to the punch.

"I loved you, Shin."

His crimson eyes blinked once. And then they contorted bitterly, painfully. It was because he knew that he couldn't and had no intention of answering Kurena's words, her feelings.

...Yeah. I know. You wouldn't dodge the question. You won't evade or lie about the fact that you can't answer. That's the cruel part about you.

You're honest to a cruel extent.

"I love you even now... I'll probably always love you."

Even if she'd come to love someone else later down the line, she would still love Shin. Even if that hypothetical person loved her back. And though she couldn't even begin to imagine this, even if she were to start a family with that person...

...she would always, always love Shin.

He was a savior to her and her friends in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. A comrade. A brother in arms. And really, she would have wished he'd have picked her over anyone else. He was the one she held dearest, the one she depended on the most.



She loved him, like a brother.

My...kind, precious Reaper.

“So that’s why...”

She wanted the path of her comrade, her family, the person she cared about most in the world to be blessed. It was, perhaps, the single most natural, obvious wish one could harbor for another. Even with the world being what it was, wishing for this was to be expected.

“...you have to be happy. You have to find happiness,” Kurena told him with a smile.

Shin remained silent for a brief moment. He was torn between the answer he wanted to give her and the words he could direct at himself. And after remaining silent and coming to terms with those conflicting feelings, he eventually said one thing.

No matter what he wanted to tell her, he couldn’t answer Kurena’s feelings, so he said the one thing he was allowed to say.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. After all, up until now...”

And even now. And probably always.

“...I’ve never once regretted loving you.”

EPILOGUE

THE CLOCK TICKS ON, EVEN IN THE CROCODILE'S STOMACH

By the time Lena and the others returned to the Rüstkammer base, reports of the operation with the Theocracy military and their army's situation had been airing for several days on the news. Also, through what might or might not have been a misunderstanding, the Myrmecoleo Regiment helping pick up the airborne battalion following the Halcyon's defeat had somehow been dramatized into them "rescuing" the Eighty-Six.

"It's not wrong, but it's a very...embellished story." Lena managed to frame it in the most diplomatic way she could.

Gilwiese (who was described as a young noble loyal to the archduchess) and Svenja (who had her young age of ten omitted and was called a "peerless beauty") drew much of the media's attention. The news program almost felt like a tabloid. Lena regarded the whole situation with an ironic smile.

In the six months since the Strike Package was first launched, the media and public had begun regarding their military accomplishments and success as something to be expected. They were getting bored of it. Now they had a fresh topic to draw their attention; they needed new heroes to look up to.

Lena noted with a strange smile that, perhaps in contrast to Svenja, Gilwiese wouldn't be quite pleased with this attention. Grethe simply shrugged.

"I'd imagine Archduchess Brantolote pulled strings to make that happen. That's the reason that regiment exists anyway."

"And they decided to play the jester for the sake of distracting the

masses,” Vika added in a matter-of-fact tone. “An archduke wouldn’t glorify the acts of their own soldiers solely for the sake of hogging all the spotlight.”

Lerche, who had her repairs completed while the Strike Package was in the Theocracy, was standing behind him as always. He then looked down at the paper that had just been delivered from the Federacy’s integrated headquarters.

“We can’t very well let the media report this, after all. Until it can be put to practical use, you must keep it hidden even from your own civilians, lest the Legion somehow learn of it.”

“—Yes.”

Since their operation in the Fleet Countries, the Strike Package had been given another directive, on top of destroying important Legion positions. They were to capture the control cores of Legion commander units.

During these simultaneous raids, not only did Shin’s 1st Armored Division succeed in this task, but the 2nd Armored Division and a Free Regiment that was attacking another position also retrieved the control cores of some Weisel units.

And the results of those endeavors were the small mountain of papers piled up in front of them. Indeed, these were paper documents, not electronic, which were usually used by the Federacy. This was a precaution meant to prevent the Legion from somehow tapping into this vital information.

“Technical spec sheets for a mass-produced Morpho, the Noctiluca, and the Halcyon. And more importantly, location data for multiple Legion command positions. This is a major haul.”

“Yes. And if that’s the case, then...”

The whole way from the Theocracy to the Federacy, five Processors had confessed their feelings to Kurena, for whatever reason.

They knew Kurena pined for Shin, and upon hearing that she’d finally come to terms with her feelings, they all stopped by to express their own feelings for her. Two of them were acquaintances of hers, two she’d barely spoken to, and one of them was a guy the same age as she was from her platoon. He said he’d hid his feelings, but he had always admired her.

Being desired was awkward in that ticklish way. But while she did appreciate them being considerate of the situation, she couldn’t help but feel oddly annoyed at the fact that they’d all effectively waited for her to be rejected.

With that odd emotion brewing in her mind, Kurena walked down the base’s corridors. Turning a corner, she ran into Theo, who had just

happened to leave his room.

“Oh, hey, Kurena. Welcome back.”

His tone was light. Same as always.

“Thanks... Finally out of the hospital?”

“Yeah, I was discharged a short while ago. Came in today to pick up my things.”

Something was sticking out from his sleeve in place of his missing left hand. It was...not a prosthetic limb, but rather, a hook, for whatever reason. Noticing Kurena's gaze, Theo chuckled.

“Oh, this. Cool, isn't it? Captain Ishmael sent it to me.”

Kurena felt guilty thinking about this, both for Theo and Ishmael's sake, but...it struck her as eerie.

“It, uh, y'know... It makes it look like a crocodile ate my hand.”

“Oh... That. Well, I guess that's true for pirates...”

He held up his hook hand while carrying a large bag on his shoulder. Those were probably the things he stopped by to get. And since his room here was technically his “place of residence,” the fact that he came to pick up his things implied something.

“...You're retiring?”

The smile faded from his jade eyes as he peered back at her. There was no anger at her touching on that wound, or sorrow. They were serene. Like lukewarm water.

“Well, I'm not planning on doing that. Not yet anyway. I need to go into rehab, though, and since I'll be working in a different branch of the military, my curriculum's gonna change, too.”

He couldn't remain a Processor in the armored branch. So instead, he would go down another path. Away from this base. And perhaps, he would leave the military altogether.

“I'll go see what it's like away from the battlefield a little earlier than the rest of you,” Theo said with a bright smile. “People who dropped out for the same reason are helping me... And if it happens to anyone else, I can help them.”

“Yeah.” Kurena nodded back at him with a smile.

Even if he couldn't stay on the battlefield, even if he couldn't fight, he could find something new to give him shape. It would take some time, but he could do it. They'd already been able to define themselves as Eighty-Six once before, after all.

So she could believe both in Theo and in herself. Because now... she didn't need to be afraid anymore. She could see him off with a smile.

“Yeah. See you, Theo.”

“So the analysis results on those control cores are out already. The

Federacy's higher-ups really were motivated about this, huh?"

"They had us get those control cores because they thought they were important or necessary and they did it pretty quickly. Maybe it just goes to show that the Federacy seriously feels that cornered."

Lena and the other officers had gotten the results of the analysis, and this news also reached Shin, the squad captain, and their lieutenants. As such, the fact that Shin and Raiden, respectively the captain and vice captain of the 1st Armored Division, were discussing this matter wasn't unnatural in and of itself.

But that was only a pretense for the real conversation they were having.

Faint autumn sunlight filtered into the corridors of the Rüstkammer base's barracks. It was right around this time two years ago, in the final disposal site that was the Eighty-Sixth Sector's first ward, that they were ordered to go on their Special Reconnaissance mission. Their death march. And just like then, the autumn sun shone down on them.

Raiden spoke curtly. He was talking not of the official results reports to Lena, but of the hidden results only they knew of.

"...They found it."

"Yeah."

Ernst directly reported it to Shin, Raiden, Kurena, and Anju, as well as Theo before he left the base. This was secret intelligence known only to the five of them.

A hidden base estimated to be a transmission point that was capable of sending out a shutdown command to every single Legion unit was among the command bases they'd discovered.

It seemed the idea of putting an end to the Legion War through conventional means was impossible. Even the Federacy was beginning to feel the sense of crisis set in. But the keys needed to stop it were all in Ernst's grasp now.

So what came next was clear.

They took a turn in the corridor, where they found Anju, and behind her...was Frederica. The girl looked up at Shin with her crimson eyes, which burned with determination. She had heard the news as well.

They would still need to wait for Ernst and the others to complete their political maneuvering to ensure Frederica's safety. And the coming operation would be a big one, so the military would have to prepare accordingly.

But even so, once that was finished...

"We'll go on the counteroffensive."

AFTERWORD

I'm skirting on the very edge of my page limit, so no idle chatter this time!

Hello everyone, this is Asato Asato. Thank you for waiting as always! *86—Eighty-Six, Vol. 9: Valkyrie Has Landed* is here for your reading pleasure.

This time, we cover the Theocracy arc. As you've likely imagined, the Teshat come from the same inspiration as the Eighty-Six. I was actually planning on writing them into another novel, but I ended up introducing them into *86* anyway.

First, a few announcements. I'm actually so limited on page space because there are so many announcements to make, which is very exciting.

Volume 1 of Somemiya's *86—Operation High School* manga is on sale! And! Bandai has also announced they'll be selling plastic models of the Juggernauts and Lena! And Ichiban Kuji announced they'll be releasing merchandise as well! The world of *86* just keeps expanding at an alarming rate! Please support all of those, as well as Yoshihara's manga adaptation and the anime adaptation!

Next, some commentary.

- The Armée Furieuse

The spaceship that carries our heroes into battle is important. Since Volume 3, I've been racking my brains over how to break through the Legion and ferry Shin and his group to their battle against the final boss. By Volume 6, I came to realize that they can't really just fight their way through enemy lines.

However!

If they can't fight their way through, they just need to fly over it. And the M551 Sheridan light tank, which served as the inspiration for the Juggernaut, is also said to be imaged after the Ghost Riders (mentioned later), so I figured, yeah, let's make it airborne!

But aircraft can't fly through the air because of the Eintagsfliege... So why not fire them off with a catapult?! Don't worry, it'll be fine—the Morpho's right there, flinging shells that weigh several tonnes all over the place, so this can work! And Volume 5 had the Ameise being propelled using catapults, so if they can do it, the Reginleifs can figure something out, too!

So that's how I came up with an airborne unit being propelled with a catapult.

God, I feel stupid.

- The Ghost Riders

An army of ghosts galloping across the night sky. In German and Norse mythology, Odin himself is said to lead the riders. And since Shin is already regarded as Odin, why not make the Eighty-Six the Ghost Riders, then? This was actually the original name I had in mind for the Nordlicht squadron back in the Federacy arc. But I didn't put it to use then, so I figured I could use it for the aerial armament.

Last, some thanks.

To my editors, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. There's not much I can say this time other than...I'm sorry...

To Shirabii. As I was writing this volume, I was seriously excited to see how you'd draw Frederica and Svenja's showdown in Chapter 2.

To I-IV. I was really looking forward to making use of the fact that you included heat fins on all the Legion units. With Volume 9, I finally got the chance!

To Yoshihara. The Republic arc is approaching its climax in the manga at long last!

To Somemiya. Schoolboy Shin keeps teasing Lena every time. Give him some bad karma already!

To Director Ishii. The way you render Kurena is just too cute. I pretty much wrote Volume 9 out of jealousy for how adorable you made her out to be!

To Bandai. I ordered my plastic models already. Yay!

And to all of you who picked up this book. Thank you all so, so much. The tale of the Eighty-Six's pride and scars, which has been ongoing since Volume 4, finally reaches its conclusion in this volume. From now on, they begin to fight with their eyes fixed on the future. Please watch over their story for just a while longer.

In any case, I hope that for even a short moment, I could take you to the battlefield in the farthest reaches, where ash falls like snow. To her and their side as they waver in the interstices of pride, wishes, and curses.

Music playing while writing this afterword:
“Amusement City Veronica” by YurryCanon

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